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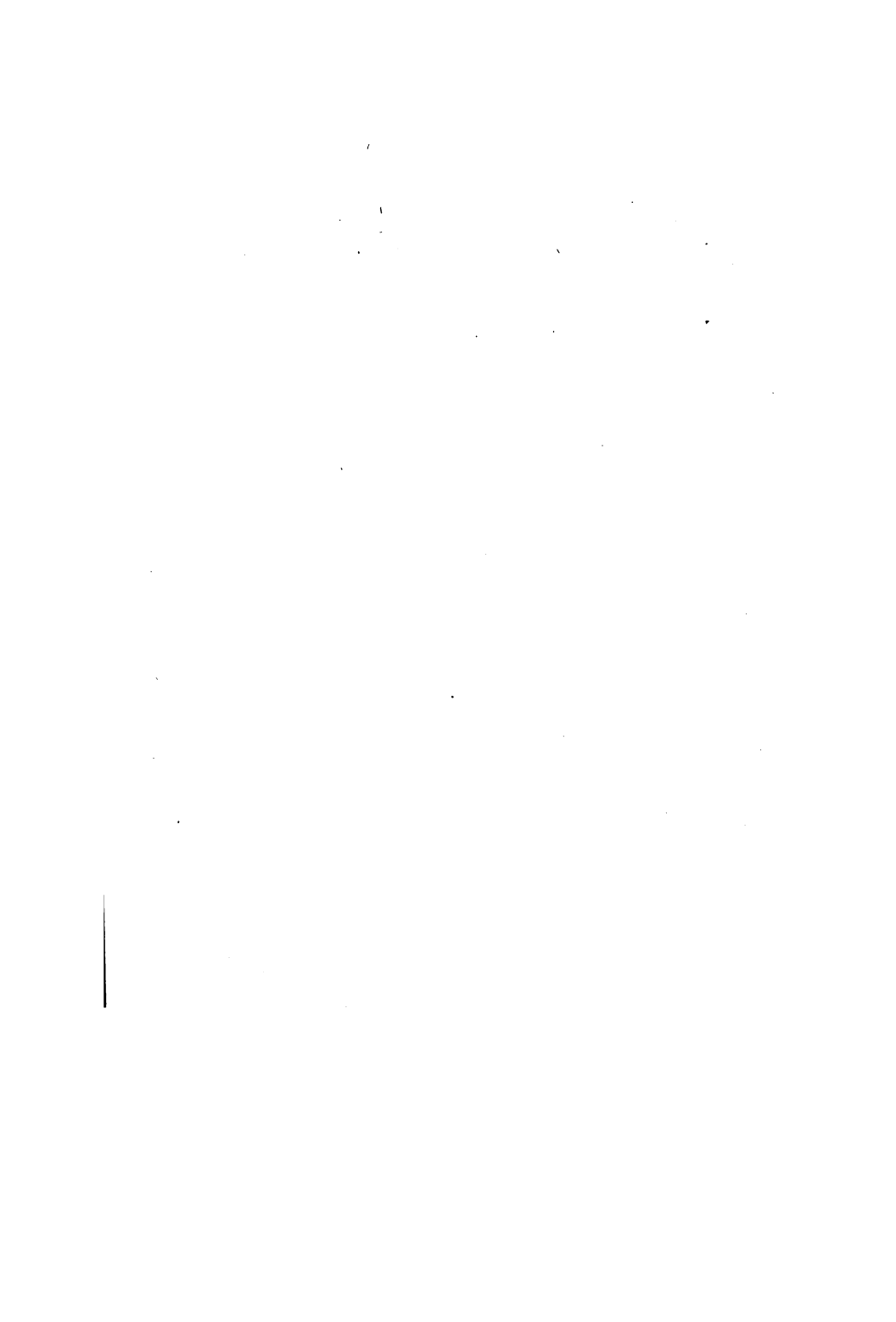
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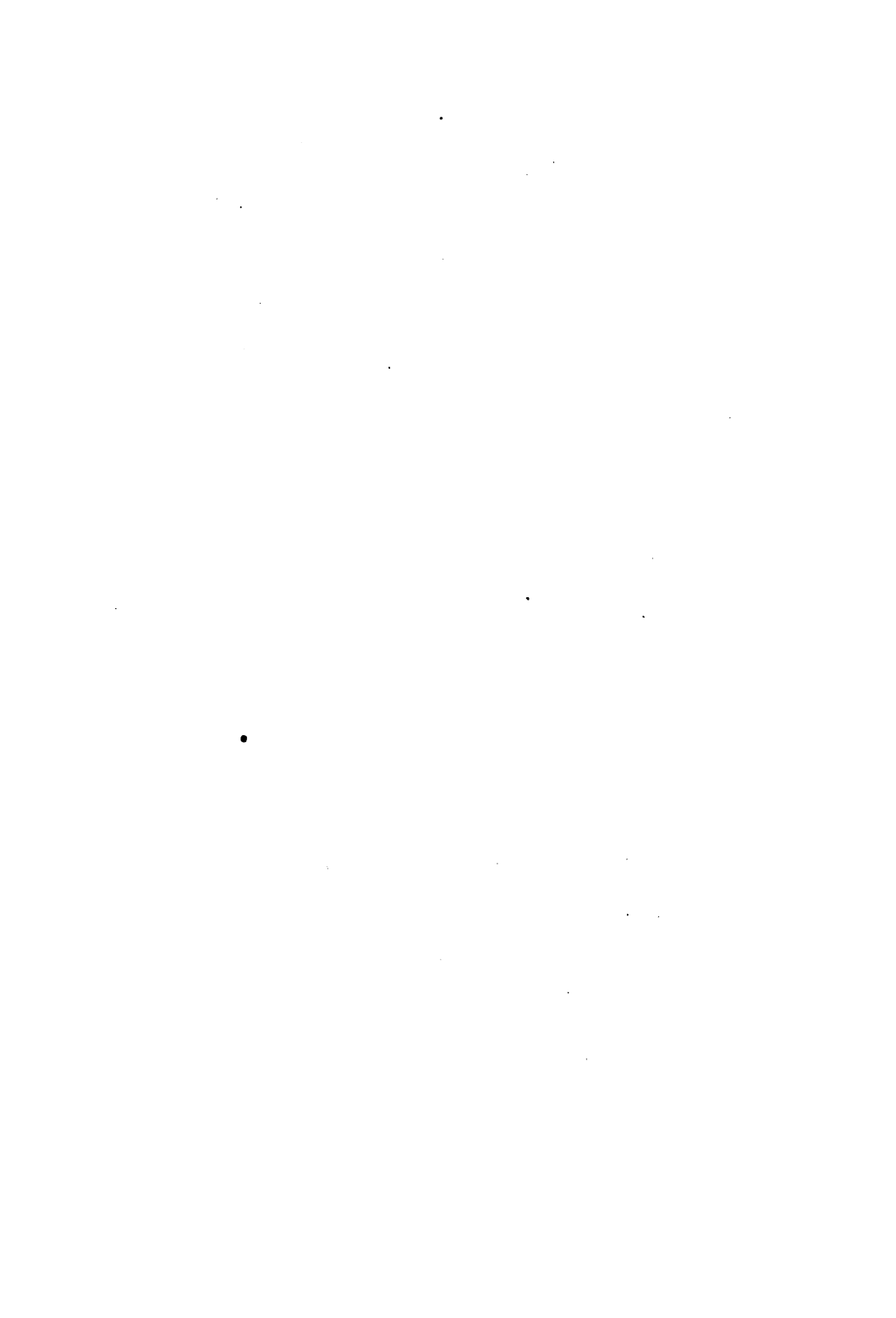
STING OF
OLIVE VAUGHAN

P. J. BREBNER



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**THE TESTING OF
OLIVE VAUGHAN**

NEW YORK
4/4/27
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THE TESTING OF OLIVE VAUGHAN

BY

PERCY JAMES BREBNER

AUTHOR OF "PRINCESS MARITZA," ETC.

1

"Thy purpose firm is equal to the deed;
Who does the best his circumstance allows
Does well, acts nobly; angels could no more."

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C. H. DOSCHER & CO.

1909

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THE TESTING OF OLIVE VAUGHAN

CHAPTER I

THE CLUB IN EAST STREET

“OVERTON!”

The man about to cross Piccadilly Circus turned round to face the rather shabbily dressed individual who had called after him.

“Halloo, Tennant, how are you? You are a stranger. Has the golden harvest you deserve to reap begun to ripen yet?”

“It may be ripening, but I don’t know where. I have been doing plenty of work, but the return does not warrant luxury. For the first time since my marriage I managed to pay my rent this quarter without asking for extra time, which is something. It was worth a considerable amount of money, I can assure you, to witness my wife’s great satisfaction.”

His difficulties did not trouble him, apparently, for he laughed light-heartedly.

“Things might be worse, then?” said Overton.

“I have never been able to consider my affairs so bad that they might not be worse. My inability to do so has caused my wife much trouble at times.

“You have made two mistakes in life, Tennant. You should never have condescended to hackwork, and you ought not to have got married.”

“My marriage was not a mistake, at least so far as I am concerned. Truth compels the admission that I sometimes pity my wife. As for my work, I cannot afford to be original. Originality is a luxury, Overton. Making bricks pays; trying to manufacture diamonds costs money, and usually ends in failure.

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However, I didn't stop you to talk about myself. I have found a new protégée for you."

"I am not sure that I want one."

"It is a hobby of yours to give people a helping hand," Tennant went on; "I happen to know it personally."

"An introduction to a newspaper editor; don't talk of it."

"And I am not the only one who has to thank you for your influence."

"Well, there are some I have helped, perhaps," Overton answered, "and I am repaid by their success. My philanthropy is a very transparent affair. When people recognize that I have discovered a genius for them, my vanity is pleased. You see I am really very selfish."

"I have found a jewel in a rubbish heap, I believe. I want you to see if you think it worth while picking up and having polished."

"Author, painter, poet—which is it?"

"The gem is uncut as yet," said Tennant. "I cannot say whether it is diamond, ruby, or sapphire."

"Or common flint, eh?"

"It is not that."

"Man or woman?" asked Overton.

"A woman."

"They are the most deceptive," laughed Overton.

"So often very pretty, and so often very worthless, too. We are getting in everybody's way here. Let us go across to the Criterion, and you can tell me all about her in plain language."

Overton drank black coffee, Tennant whisky.

"There is a little club I go to now and again," said Tennant, taking a cigarette from his friend's case; "lately I have been rather often. I cannot afford to give away money for others' benefit, so I give a little of my poor talent. I play the piano; perhaps you did not know it?"

"You do too many things; that is why you don't succeed."

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"Even my piano playing has brought grist to the mill before now," said Tennant. "This club is off the Waterloo Road, and was started by an enthusiastic parson with the idea of alleviating the general dreariness of the lives, and bettering the somewhat eccentric morals of girls employed in factories and such like. The girls can have their dinner there. There is a small library and some classes in connection with it, and once a fortnight they have a scratch entertainment. Two or three ladies go in, sing them a song and talk to them, and the girls themselves are encouraged to sing. They dance sometimes; in fact, everything possible is done to amuse the girls and keep them out of the streets. I was asked to go, and since my efforts seemed to give a good deal of pleasure, I went again."

"So the jewel is a factory girl?"

"I fancy the matron said she was not engaged in a factory, but at any rate she is very different from those around her."

"More beautiful, of course?"

"Yes, I suppose she is better-looking than most of them, although, for that matter, there are several very striking-looking young women there. I haven't taken much notice of her looks; but, Overton, she can sing and dance. Give that girl a chance, and London will be raving about her."

"Just so, and turn her silly head and make of her something far worse than a factory girl. My dear fellow, you are asking me to give her a helping hand to destruction."

"I am asking you to do nothing of the kind. I do not want to get her on to the stage of a fifth-rate music-hall. She is worthy of something much higher, I believe. Besides, her head is not likely to be easily turned. She has a strong and a good face. What the conditions of her life are I do not know; they may be capable of driving her to the dogs; but at present she is just as capable of getting as near heaven as most people."

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"The heroine of a future novel by Gilbert Tennant, evidently."

"I want to do something for her in reality before I put her into fiction."

"My dear Tennant, beauty, success, money, the world's praise, are not the best roads to heaven. Religion marks them with danger-boards."

"It is a new departure for you to talk cant."

"I am merely stating what are generally accepted as facts."

"It sounded like cant," replied Tennant. "I respect religion; but when heaven and hell merely represent the different futures of poor and rich, and heaven's gate is supposed to be usually shut against a coronet and a full purse, I discern the cloven hoof of humbug. The narrow way is quite broad enough to accommodate a carriage and pair."

"I have made no statement to the contrary."

"You implied a belief in the theory that to be rich is to be wicked. It forms the basis for an immense amount of modern argument, and a lot of nonsensical pampering of the working classes."

"I entirely agree with you, but it does not alter the fact that there are grave dangers in the kind of philanthropy that I have indulged in. You remember Sellars; I did not do him much good, did I? I discovered a 'cello player of remarkable power, and the success to which I helped him ruined him. It would have been wiser to have left him in the tenth-rate orchestra in which I found him."

"It was his fault, not yours."

"That is the usual way of shifting the responsibility, but I doubt if it is quite an honest way."

"I do not admit Sellars as an example," said Tennant. "He would probably have gone to the bad under any circumstances. I should rather consider that you gave him a chance which he did not take advantage of. I believe that if a person of remarkable ability is born into a station inferior to his powers, he must either rise or fall. The gifts he has compel him to

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an erratic course compared with the conduct of those about him. He must find an outlet for his genius either upward or downward; there is no medium for his work on the dead level. How often immense genius is displayed by notorious criminals. Who is to say to what heights their genius might not have taken them had it been properly directed, and I maintain that the person who lends a helping hand is in no way to blame if, in spite of it, the recipient goes to the bad."

"This factory girl of yours has given you the text for a discourse, friend Tennant. Surely there must be something remarkable about her. What do you propose that I shall do?"

"Come and see her, and hear her sing."

"When?"

"To-night."

"You strike the iron hot with a vengeance."

"These entertainments are only given during the winter. To-night, I believe, is the last."

"If you were as keen about your own business, Tennant, as you are about other people's, you would be a more successful man."

"Very likely. I suppose I ought to bargain for a commission on the girl's profits."

"If you were not married, I should suspect you of looking forward to another reward."

"A future wife!" laughed Tennant. "I should think a great deal too much of myself, under any circumstances, to retire into the background and be known only as Mrs. Gilbert Tennant's husband. I have an immense appreciation of myself, Overton, but have a repugnance to self-advertisement. Will you come to-night?"

"I see no harm in coming. I am interested in the working of these clubs; but remember I make no promise. You must not be disappointed if I do not help your protégée, nor must you lead her to suppose that I intend to do anything."

She knows nothing of my interest in her, and is

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not even aware of the existence of such a person as yourself."

"I doubt the first statement," answered Overton. "Your interest has grown so luxuriantly, she must be a very wonderful woman if she has not observed it."

"She is a wonderful woman," said Tennant. "You shall judge for yourself."

Two houses in East Street had been knocked into one to form the factory girl's club, and the institution was doing a great and good work in the neighborhood. The organizers had been wise enough not to hedge it round with too many rules and restrictions. It was raised on a religious foundation, but the girls were not bound to attend a prayer-meeting before they ate, or sang, or danced. No one lay in wait to talk religion in season and out, nor was the entertainment of the house the gilding of a religious pill. The atmosphere of the rooms was bright and cheerful, not impelling to laugh softly and talk in whispers, and the matron was a wise woman who understood the girls she had to do with. She was their friend, not their mistress, and in the distinction lay her power. It was seldom she had to call any one to order. Of course they were noisy, rough even sometimes, and the jests on occasion were not too delicate. Who could expect them to be? For the most part the girls were a harmless set of young animals, with real good nature under their rough exterior, and who would, in the course of time, be better wives and mothers, and better women, for the influence under which they had been brought.

The large room of the club was full when Tennant brought Overton in and introduced him to the matron.

"My friend is very interested in this kind of work; I thought there would be no objection to my bringing him."

"Any friend of yours, Mr. Tennant, is very welcome."

Not only with the matron was Gilbert Tennant a *persona grata*. The girls gave him an enthusiastic

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welcome. Some greeted him with a "Good evening, sir," others with "Good luck to you, you're the boy for our money," and a few with rougher expressions.

"They are really glad," whispered Tennant to his companion. "The coarser welcomes are just as genuine as the others."

"And where is the girl?" asked Overton.

"I will point her out presently. I do not think she has come in yet."

Overton took a seat near the piano, and studied the scene before him. Some of the rougher members criticised him audibly. They did, or they did not, care about his looks, or his manner, or his dress, but at any rate he was a "toff," and therefore a subject for discussion. They probably did not intend him to hear what they said, but their raucous voices were not capable of whispering. Tennant was at home with them. He spoke to several of the girls who had sung on former occasions, asking what they were prepared to do to-night, ready with advice and suggestions. He knew each one's small repertoire and it pleased them.

"Good evening."

He turned. It was the girl he had brought Overton to see.

"Come on over 'ere, Clara."

"Here y'are, old girl; seat's warm for yer."

"Don't tike no notice o' any on 'em, Clara; here's your perch over 'ere."

At least a dozen greetings of this sort were hurled at the newcomer, who laughed good-naturedly and accepted the first invitation, intimating that they should all have their turn.

"You will sing to-night?" said Tennant.

"Not if there's plenty without me. I'm tired."

"I say, Clara, old girl, give us a song; none o' your shirks."

"Garn, she'll sing; she's only kiddin'."

Tennant glanced at Overton, but there was no need to tell him the girl had arrived. He was already

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studying her. She had glanced at him with some curiosity, since he was a stranger, but she turned to her companions quite oblivious, apparently, to the fact that she was being scrutinized. Either she was used to it and accepted it as an ordinary and natural thing, or else she was ignorant of her own attractions.

Tennant had not attempted to describe her to Overton. He had only said that she had a strong, good face. She was above the medium height, and gave the impression of being taller than she was. Her movements and her poses were full of unstudied grace. At any moment one might fancy that she looked at her best, until she moved; then the former picture was forgotten in the new one. The subtle charm of her figure, and of her movements, would probably appeal to any one with any artistic taste at all, but her claim to actual beauty might not have passed altogether unchallenged. It was first and foremost a strong face, in repose a little hard, too, it may be; the thin lips closed tightly, and there was a suspicion of squareness about the lower jaw. Her forehead was perhaps a little too low for beauty's accepted lines, the nose too sharp. She had a habit of looking down when she listened or was thoughtful, and while admiring unquestioningly the long lashes with their upward curve, and the dull copper glory of her hair, one might deny her claim to be considered really beautiful. But when a chance remark interested her, her face lit up with a smile; and then, as she looked at you, it would be difficult to deny her beauty. Such a pair of gray eyes have seldom looked into yours. They were dark and deep—smiles and tears mingled in them. You felt that in those eyes there was a history to be read, or perhaps a romance. Love lay slumbering in the shadows of them, and passion too. There was something to discover in the depths of such eyes as these.

Overton may not have diagnosed his impressions thus precisely as he studied the girl, but he found her

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wonderfully interesting. No other woman there drew even a passing thought from him. This one plunged him into speculation. She was better dressed than her companions, and she wore a hat which was a distinction. Most of the girls had come bareheaded, or only with a shawl hoodwise on their heads. Her hands were white and delicate-looking, a contrast to the other hands, which were rough and labor-hardened. Her voice was soft and gentle, and she spoke correctly. Although there was no attempt to emphasize the fact, she seemed conscious of her own superiority, and more, her companions were conscious of it, too. The difference was real. She could afford to be friendly with them all because the difference was so real. She lost nothing by associating with them any more than those ladies did who came to sing to them. This distinction, this apartness, impressed Overton the moment the girl entered the room; that she was beautiful dawned upon him later in the evening.

He expected something unusual when the girl got up to sing. She stood a little apart from the piano as Tennant played the opening bars of a ballad popular just then, her hands clasped lightly in front of her. Although she must have known that Overton was watching her more keenly than he had watched others who had sung, she showed no sign of nervousness. His praise or blame did not concern her. She was singing to give the other girls pleasure. It was a rich contralto voice, clear and pure as a deep-toned bell, and she sang well, with faulty phrasing here and there, but with true feeling and pathos.

There was much applause when the song ended, but she was not easily persuaded to sing again. She had no desire to show off. It was Tennant who prevailed upon her, and suggested the song.

"They must all be tired of that," she said, "I have sung it so often."

It was a serio-comic ditty, a small character effusion with patter between the verses, nothing very

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clever or witty in it really, but offering some scope for acting. The girl's powers of mimicry and expression were marvelous. Every point was made to tell without being forced, and the sudden change from farce to pathos which came in the last verse nearly changed her audience's laughter into tears.

"You sings that 'ere better every time," shouted one, as the song ended.

"Well done," said Overton quietly.

She smiled.

"Won't you sing another?"

"Oh, no. I'm much too tired."

Tennant did not attempt to persuade her. He was only anxious to get away now and learn Overton's opinion.

"Those rooms get awfully stuffy," said Overton, drawing a long breath, as they stepped into the street. "Charity is an excellent thing, but it cannot prevent humanity, insufficiently washed, being a trial."

"Bother unwashed humanity! What do you think of the girl?"

"My dear Tennant, I am not going into raptures about her."

"Am I right? Is she worth picking out of the rubbish?"

"She has talent certainly. With a few years' study she might do something."

"Steady with the study, Overton. Too much training is not good for a genius; it stamps out half the originality."

"Don't be too enthusiastic. It is a fault of yours, Tennant. I will think the matter over. I am going on to the Phoenix; can I drive you anywhere?"

"No, thanks. I am going to Waterloo. You will let me hear from you. I believe there is a future before that girl."

"A future! Of course there is. A husband, a family, and plenty of trouble probably; six feet of mother earth certainly. Good night."

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He stopped a passing hansom and got in.

"Tennant is right," he said. "She has something akin to genius in her, and is beautiful. I shall have to help her, because she is a beautiful woman—and a genius."

CHAPTER II

THE PHOENIX CLUB IN ST. JAMES'S STREET

THE Phoenix Club in St. James's Street was sandwiched between two others more pretentious, though not more exclusive. The Phoenix was exclusive, but it is difficult to say in what way exactly. It had no political status, had no alliance with the Arts or the Services, nor were all its members of exceptional social position. Most of us have come across men whom we are astonished to find are members of some crack club. We wonder how they managed to obtain admission, what they have done to recommend them. We have always considered them very ordinary individuals indeed, and yet ourselves have never dared to aspire to membership of that particular club. Neither money, position, nor brains is quite a sufficient reason for the seeming discrepancy. It was so with the Phoenix. You involuntarily thought better of a man who belonged to it. You were inclined to think better of yourself if you knew a member of it, especially if you knew him well enough to be invited to dine there.

Edward Overton went into the smoking room, told the waiter to bring him a whisky and seltzer, and took up an evening paper. He was going to sit down when he saw a man in the far corner and crossed over to him.

"I thought you were asleep, Densham."

"No, I was thinking."

"Gossip maligns you, then."

"How?"

"Gossip says you always act on impulse and never pause to think."

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"The hag's tongue should be slit for talking so freely," Densham said. "Still, she is right this time. I am going to mend my ways, and in future never act until I have thought the matter out from every point of view."

"You will probably develop into a much better man, but be nothing like so good an acquaintance," said Overton, lighting a cigar.

"Possibly; but after all, the good fellows we are so fond of talking about are a poor lot, weak-kneed and morally disjointed."

"You are severe upon yourself, Densham."

"I know. My companions' estimation of me has opened my eyes."

"And now comes the leaf-turning, I see. I suppose that is why I find you in here instead of in the card room; you usually patronize the card room, I believe."

"Upon my word, Overton, I shall begin to think you are really interested in me, you seem to have studied my proceedings so carefully."

"I am, very interested. You always seem to me to be cut out for something you have never managed to attain to. It always makes me sad to see a really good article in a second-hand shop."

Densham pulled his mustache and looked at his companion for some moments in silence. It was a habit of his, and was rather disconcerting.

"You are very kind, Overton," he said presently. "I am quite aware that there is room for improvement, although I hardly know why I admit it to you. You and I have very little in common. To begin with, you don't like me; to go on with, I don't like you. We cannot help it; there it is, with no tangible reason. Were there any reason we should possibly be bitter enemies; as it is, we meet and are polite to each other. Men call me a good fellow; you think me a fool. Men call you a philanthropist, and I believe you are a humbug. That is the position in a nutshell. We dislike each other so equally, in fact, and understand

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each other so well, that we can afford to ask each other's advice in a friendly way. I am inclined to ask yours."

"I have never attempted to diagnose the case so carefully," said Overton quietly. "I am willing to take the result you arrive at as correct, and am ready to give you the best advice in my power."

"As a man of the world, then?"

"Pardon me, I do not pose as a man of the world."

"As a philanthropist, then?"

"Nor do I pose as that either. My friends, or my enemies, I hardly know which, choose to call me a philanthropist. I lay no claim to the title myself."

"We won't quarrel about phrases," said Densham. "I choose to think that I have seen the worldly nature stare through the veneer of philanthropy, and if I am wrong you are not the man to give me advice. Cut-and-dried rules are of no use to me."

Overton smiled, expressing his willingness to accept the position his companion assigned to him.

"We will keep the case in the abstract," Densham went on. "It is so much easier to be quite honest in the abstract. Take a man, then, with a fair amount of brains which he has used indifferently, a fair amount of money which he has had wit enough not to squander, with the usual qualities which go to the making of a good fellow, and with the usual little heap of sins considered by his boon companions rather fascinating than otherwise. Conceive this man, having arrived at thirty years of age or thereabouts, sitting down on a stone heap by the side of life's highway to look back at the way he has come. He is very dissatisfied; how is he to proceed so that he may make the journey before him more satisfactory?"

"Without attempting to be allegorical, I should say, let him turn his back on the past and live a better life in the future."

"That is safe advice to give, and has the merit of being obvious," answered Densham.

"It is the only course I can conceive," said Over-

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ton. "The past is past, and the deeds that are done in it are done, and there is no undoing them. It is wisdom to let the dead past bury its dead. It will bury them deeper, and more satisfactorily, than you can."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. I have no belief in a gospel which would make the past hamper the future. If a man will start afresh, let him go forward with free limbs and strong energy, not with a contracted chest as though a load were upon his back, and his hands tied behind him. Let him achieve better things and forget the past."

"If he can," said Densham.

"Of course he can. Have you ever had the toothache?"

"Yes."

"Can you conjure up any idea of what the pain is like? I dare swear you cannot. If a man goes honestly toward better things, he will find, when he looks back, that he has unconsciously turned a bend in the road."

"A comfortable solution if it were not for the fact that life's highway is straight, memory hedging it from the beginning to the now. You are a more worldly man than I thought you, Overton."

"I regret my advice is of no use to you."

"I have hardly stated the case yet," said Densham; "we'll go back to the man on the heap of stones for a moment. He is looking back regretfully, and the past has made no attempt to bury its dead yet."

"Give it time."

"Down that road stand shapes of men and women," Densham went on; "some dim and hardly discernible, some sharp drawn against the background, their arms outstretched, not tempting but pleading. It is these last which trouble the traveler."

"They are shadows of the past. Let him go forward and forget his wasted hours."

"Wasted hours! There are no such things in the

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life of a man. My traveler knows, as he looks back, that what he would willingly believe was only wasted time, was richer in its harvest than any other, a harvest of weeds which have grown strong enough to impede the path of other travelers. There is one, a woman. She stands where the weeds are thickest and is helpless. To this point she has come hand in hand with the traveler, with him and because of him. He has hurried forward to the stone heap; ought he to go back and help her?"

"Your allegory is getting a little too profound for me," said Overton. "Help her to what? To the heap of stones?"

"There is the difficulty. She might not be able to walk so far."

"Would she be likely to start afresh with the traveler?"

"That is the question."

"I think I understand your meaning," said Overton, after a pause. "My opinion is, putting it in the same fanciful spirit as you have propounded the case, that the traveler should send her a strong staff to help her, and then go his way. She would only hinder him if he sought to do more, perhaps prevent his going forward altogether."

"Lock up his youthful follies, in fact, and rejoice that he is no worse than other men," said Densham.

"Well, it comes to that," said Overton slowly. "Let us drop your traveler and his heap of stones; they don't fit into modern requirements. You see, Densham, to be no worse than other men is not such a mean standard as some would have us believe. Men will be men as surely as boys will be boys. The tricks of boys trouble us at the time, but we forget and forgive them. Do we brand that boy a scoundrel for life because he climbed the fence of our orchard and stole an apple on his way to school? Certainly not. Then why be less merciful to a man who errs on his way into his larger life."

"The law would lock him up if he stole your

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apples," said Densham. "I am afraid the argument isn't watertight. Besides, it does not fit the case."

"I am afraid our similes have grown somewhat confusing," Overton admitted. "But in plain language, let me say one thing. A woman's reputation is never stolen unless she opens the door to the thief, and it is a false sentiment which would demand from the thief payment of the whole reckoning."

"And your philanthropy has taught you no more than that?"

"I am satisfied with the teaching."

"Ah! My traveler saw things differently. He found that although folly often gives long credit, it never forgets to demand payment of the bill with interest."

Overton drank the last of his whisky and rose.

"If you are going back to that incomprehensible individual, I am going home. Frankly, I do not understand him."

"Thanks for listening to me. The fact is, men—men like you and I—are all tarred with the same brush, and they all go to the same pond to wash themselves. I shall be eccentric, I shall go elsewhere. Good night."

"Queer fellow," said Overton to himself. "Half crank, half fool. I wonder why I dislike him so much?"

Densham's contemplated reformation, and the form it was likely to take, did not interest Overton much on his way home. Uppermost in his thoughts was the girl he had seen for the first time that evening. As he walked down Piccadilly and along by the Park, he forgot the Phoenix smoking room and remembered only the clubroom in the East End, the glare, the noise, the stuffy atmosphere. He remembered how the presence of one woman changed everything, how her personality dominated everything. He heard again the rich young voice singing a hackneyed music-hall ballad which, under ordinary circumstances, he would not have had the patience to listen to; heard again

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the comic patter of her other song, and recognized that Tennant was right, that genius was in her. She was a jewel worth picking out of the rubbish heap. But it was of the woman he thought, not of her genius; it was of her face and figure, her beauty, herself, not of her powers. As he approached Hyde Park Corner, he was almost sorry that she had genius as well."

"I must set Tennant to work," he thought. "I could not have a better henchman, for he will speak more good of me than I dare even think of myself."

In answer to a wave of his stick a cab drew up to the curb.

"Sloane Street."

CHAPTER III

CLARA FARROW

WITHIN a stone's throw of the club in East Street, in another turning off the Waterloo Road, was a dingy shop, over which was the legend, "Gibson, Modeler in Wax, 1820." How anyone could possibly have made a living out of such a business, in such a place, was a difficult problem to solve; but somebody evidently had solved it, for although Gibson had long since vacated the premises and been gathered to his fathers, the shop was still a wax modeler's. A board was suspended in the window with "Doll's Hospital" painted upon it in foot-long letters, and dolls in all stages of composition and decomposition were arranged in rows, or lying in little heaps—wax heads, arms, and legs in all sizes and varieties. In the center of the window, clad in a tawdry satin and lace gown, lay a mechanical sleeping beauty, and standing at her feet was the latest notorious criminal dressed, so a paper pinned to him declared, in the identical clothes which he wore at his execution. There were busts of half a dozen people famous in the artistic and political world, grewsome caricatures; and a gorgeously attired Indian prince with a moist face and drawn features. He happened to be placed close to a gas jet, and suffered accordingly.

Within the shop there were figures and busts in all directions, and the little back parlor was crowded with famous persons. Odds and ends were piled in every corner and upon the counter—wax limbs, rusty laced coats, and faded dresses—while behind the counter from dawn till dark sat Jacob Farrow, always smoking, always dirty. He did not seem to expect anyone

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to come into the shop to buy, and might possibly have refused to sell the figure of the Prime Minister which stood just behind him, for he was useful. He wore Farrow's hat whenever the wax modeler was not using it himself, and the original of the figure would hardly have felt flattered at his appearance in this headgear. What connection there was between the original Gibson and Jacob Farrow, or how the latter had drifted into such a business, nobody knew; and only those to whom he lent small sums of money at exorbitant interest had any idea how he lived.

This was Clara Farrow's home, and there was nothing in it to account for the girl's superiority over her companions at the club in East Street. She had been motherless since she was a child, and she had grown into what she was in spite of her surroundings, in spite of her father. Her earliest recollections were of the motionless crowd about her, ever staring at her with fixed eyes. As a child she found them companionable, and addressed her prattle to them; but as she grew older, the pale faces looking at her out of the gloom played upon her imagination. She trembled when the dusk came; imagination gave motion to the figures, and there had been times when in terror she had rushed to the shop door and stood there to find comfort in the passing people. She had grown out of these fears, but sometimes, even now, she could not sit in the shop alone. Until Clara was old enough to be useful, to dust the figures and renovate the dresses, her father had taken little notice of her; but as she grew to womanhood he recognized her beauty, and schemed to turn it to his own benefit. It never occurred to him that the very fact of his indifference estranged the girl from him, threw her entirely upon her own resources, compelled her to act and think for herself, and developed in her a force of will and determination of purpose which were quite capable of thwarting any schemes her father might form concerning her. He was rudely awakened to the knowl-

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edge of his daughter's independence when she went out one morning and got a situation at a small cheap draper's in the Borough. She had been there ever since, and fearful that she would leave him altogether, the old rascal had changed his tactics, had shown her some clumsy kindnesses, and was forever pleading his poverty and appealing to her pity. She was not deceived altogether, but she certainly did not understand his full meaning.

One friend, and only one, had come into her young life. Zett he was called; but how he came by the name—whether it was the abbreviation of a Christian name, or the whole, or part, of a surname—he did not know. At any rate, it was the only name he had. He was a hunchback with a head much too big for his body, abnormally long arms, and short twisted legs. His face was drawn on one side, his mouth was enormous, and his small beady eyes were set so far apart that they appeared to have nothing whatever to do with each other. His age was unknown, but he certainly was no longer a boy. He could neither read nor write, and had no recollection of father, mother, or friend. He picked up a precarious livelihood by selling papers, and by odd jobs, and he had never known a time when the urchins in the street had not jeered at him.

It was on an occasion of his being tormented that Clara first knew him. Zett stood facing his foes with a malignant look in his eyes. It would have been dangerous to come within reach of those long arms.

"You cowards!" Clara had said, turning upon the jeering little crowd. She was only a girl herself then.

The urchins paused irresolute for a moment, and then ran off shouting:

"Ho! Zett's got a gal. Beauty and the Beast! Garn, you ugly little devil!"

The dwarf looked at his protector, and to his limited imagination, this girl in her common frock and large boots was a vision out of another world.

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"They daren't come anigh me. Maybe they'll go for you some day, and I'll be there. Look at them arms!"

He held out his knotted limbs for her inspection, offering himself as her slave. A strange companion for a beautiful girl. He came into her life by accident, and he stayed in it, the one creature she really cared for.

One evening, about a fortnight after Overton's visit to the East Street Club, Clara entered the shop a little later than usual. She passed into the parlor without taking any notice of her father. He had not been quite sober the previous night, and his extravagant talk had been more offensive than usual. Clara had understood something of his real meaning.

He shuffled into the parlor after her.

"Good news, my dear, very good news. I've always said it would come, and if it wasn't for me you'd be out of the way of hearing of it."

"That will do; we had enough of that last night."

"Last night, Clara, they made a little too much of me over at the King's Arms. Two or three men couldn't pay me the little bit of brass they owed me, so stood treat by way of interest. Let it pass."

"You've said pretty much the same before when you were not drunk, only I have not understood it quite as well as I did last night," answered the girl.

"Your fancy; but any way, I apologize. I cannot say no fairer than that. I'm your father, and I apologize."

"Do you know what you said?" persisted the girl.

"No."

"You suggested that I should sell myself. That is what you said last night. And you are my father! Surely God must have made some mistake when He gave me into your keeping."

"You're fanciful, Clara, like your mother was; and, my dear, you're getting a little blasphemous. I have pointed out the value of your beauty in a business way. There are honest walks in life where beauty

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takes the place of capital. Besides, I was drunk last night."

"And spoke plainer than usual. I understand."

"That's it. We'll say no more about it. I'll tell you the news," said Jacob, sitting down and putting his hat on the table in front of him. "I was sitting in the shop this morning, thinking of you, my dear, as I often do, when a gentleman comes in and asks if Miss Farrow lived here. I said you did, but that you was out; would he leave a message, as I was your father, and naturally anxious to do anything for my daughter's good? He was a real gentleman. I'm a judge of character, I am."

"Come to the point. What did he want with me?"

"It was about your voice; he's heard you sing."

"I know the man. Thin, tall, dark mustache, very well dressed; seems to have known something about you all your life, and has been so interested in your past that he is forever wondering what will become of you in the future."

It was Clara's description of Edward Overton.

"No, he wasn't like that," answered Jacob. "He wasn't very tall nor very thin, and his clothes weren't any better, if so good, as those my Prime Minister has on."

"It was the other one, was it?" said Clara.

"Two of 'em, are there? Well, this one's coming to-night at nine."

"He said nothing more?"

"No. I gave him my permission to call, and he went away satisfied. Now you must remember my little scraps of advice, Clara."

"Stop that! You have given me the message, that's all you have to do with the affair."

For a moment Jacob's face darkened angrily, but he checked himself. He foresaw an ultimate advantage to himself in this man's visit, and he did not want to annoy his daughter. She was quite capable of refusing to see her visitor altogether.

"Quite right, my dear, it's your business. If I were

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you, I'd smarten up a bit. You'd got a niceish frock on last Sunday, I remember; I'd get into it. A good setting always helps a jewel, you know."

"I'm not a jewel, and I am not for sale."

"We're all for sale," chuckled Farrow. "We call it getting a living, but it's the same thing. Those who know their market value get rich, those who don't go to the wall. I'm only helping you to know your own value."

"My labor is worth exactly sixteen shillings a week and my meals. For myself, this, this body, this me"—and she touched herself—"it is priceless. When you are fascinated by a vision of my wealth, think of that."

"Priceless! That's the spirit. You've kicked at my teaching, but you've profited. If they want your voice, make 'em pay for it. If the world says you're a beautiful woman, make it pay for the privilege of looking at you."

He put on his hat and shuffled out of the shop. Clara gave a sigh of relief, and the tears started to her eyes. The consciousness of her terrible loneliness in the world was brought more forcibly home to her to-night than it had ever been. In the midst of teeming thousands there was yet no woman's sympathy she could claim, no man's strength she could look to for defense. Then she smiled. There was Zett, and the thought of him prevented the tears falling. She looked at herself in the glass over the mantelpiece and remembered her visitor. She was a woman, with a woman's instinctive desire to look nice, but it was not this exactly which made her think of the frock she wore last Sunday. She had no wish to please her visitor because he was a man, but because her appearance might influence the business he came upon. She believed, she could not explain why, that his coming touched her future. She glanced at the clock and then ran hurriedly up the narrow stairs to her room.

Nine struck as she came down again—transformed.

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It was a simple white gown of cheap material, with a little cheap lace about it and a ribbon or two, but it was cunningly devised. It fitted her lithe, strong figure to perfection, and it banished any doubt as to whether she was really beautiful or not.

The bell hanging on the shop door jangled sharply. In the dim light, with so many eyes in waxen faces staring at him, the visitor did not recognize Clara as she went to meet him.

"Is Miss Farrow in?"

"You don't know me, it seems. Will you come in?"

She led the way into the parlor and placed a chair for her visitor.

"Sit down. I knew it was you by his—by my father's description."

Gilbert Tennant took the chair offered to him, put his hat and stick upon the table, and looked at the woman before him in wonder.

"Pardon me," he said, after a pause; "I have only seen you at the club, have hardly spoken to you, and one gets a sort of stereotyped idea of what the girls must be like at home, what their surroundings are."

"And mine disappoint you?" said the girl.

"No, but you are not quite what I expected to find you."

"Does that make any difference to the business you have come upon?"

"It may not be so successful as I had hoped," Tennant answered.

"I am sorry for that. I have somehow fancied that I should get good out of your visit. You haven't, I suppose, concluded that this is a happy home, something to look forward to coming back to, and all that kind of thing?"

"It is not uncomfortable, and your father seemed——"

"Businesslike," said Clara. "That's the word, although it doesn't seem to fit in. See here, Mr. Tennant, that shop is full of wax figures, and they're for sale. I'm a woman, and from my father's point of

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view, as salable an article as any of his figures, only a little more expensive. That's all."

Gilbert nodded gravely.

"That makes things easier."

"Then let's get to business," Clara answered, seating herself by the table.

"It is not likely that you are aware of the fact, Miss Farrow, but I am an author, journalist, playwright—a general provider, in fact, of any literary stuff the public are prepared to pay for. I make a living by it, and that is about all. My friends expect me to do something big some day, and they will probably be disappointed; my wife is perfectly certain they will." Tennant mentioned his wife purposely. It strengthened his own position. "What has all this got to do with you, you will say. Well, among other things, I am something of a critic. I know how a thing ought to be done, although I cannot do it myself. When I first heard you sing, I knew you were out of the common run."

"Better than the other girls, you mean?"

"I mean more than that," answered Tennant. "I was so certain of your powers that I got Edward Overton to come and listen to you."

"And who is Mr. Overton, and why is his opinion necessary?"

"He is rather a difficult individual to pin down in a description. He is a man with money and with hobbies. One of his hobbies is giving a start to people he really believes have something in them."

"By lending them money?" asked Clara.

Her father did that, and the business did not commend itself to her.

"Money-lending—no. I mean helping talent, genius, whatever you like to call it, into its proper sphere. He has helped me."

"Are you called a genius, Mr. Tennant?"

Gilbert was not sensitive, but he looked at the girl, wondering if she were making fun of him. There was not the faintest flicker of a smile on her face.

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"To be candid, Miss Farrow, I have sometimes thought that my talent was above the ordinary, but I am bound to admit that nobody of any consequence has indorsed my opinion at present."

"And what does this Mr. Overton propose to do for me?"

"That mainly rests with you," said Tennant. "You possess a talent which you may turn to account, and the first point is, are you desirous of doing so? You must forgive me if I speak quite freely. I know nothing of you beyond the fact that you have a gift which I think it is next thing to a crime to neglect. This is my point of view, mine and Overton's. You may have other ambitions which lie in a smaller circle. The work you have may be to your taste, you may be going to get married, or——"

"I am not going to be married, and I work in a draper's shop for sixteen shillings a week."

"Sixteen shillings! And fame and fortune is yours for the asking."

She recoiled at the words. Her father had used them so often.

"The prospect does not seem to please you," said Tennant. The girl interested him exceedingly.

"There is more than one way to fortune, Mr. Tennant, at least for a woman."

"True, but——"

"An honest way, and—well, another way."

"I am sorry, but I don't quite understand what you mean," said Tennant. He was there with only one idea in his head, and the girl puzzled him.

"Why are you taking all this trouble about me? And why didn't this Mr. Overton come himself?"

"Good heavens, my girl, you are not thinking evil of me, are you?"

"I'm just testing the ground I'm asked to tread on, Mr. Tennant. The people you live among may find it unnecessary, but I live at the other end of the story so to speak, and I'm a woman—see? I'm not saying there's anything wrong about you, nor about your

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friend, for that matter, but I'm looking at facts as they are."

Gilbert Tennant was so unaccustomed to have his honesty of purpose questioned that the girl's straightforwardness somewhat disconcerted him.

"You are quite right, Miss Farrow," he said; "I must confess that that side of the matter had not occurred to me, but it is natural it should to you. Plainly, the business stands thus. You have a voice of remarkable quality, and undoubted talent as an actress. Left alone, even if the idea of entering the profession came to you, you would most probably fail to get a hearing. There are so many who are good enough that the novice, without some influence to back her, stands a poor chance. A very little study, it seems to me, and Overton's help, would insure you an engagement at a music hall. This would be the first step. Sing only as you did the other night at the club, and some measure of success is certain. Candidly, I expect you to do great things in the near future, not as a music-hall singer, but on the legitimate stage."

"It is a very pleasant picture," said Clara; "and now for the difficulties."

"You are practical," said Tennant, with a smile, "and that is an excellent sign. Overton and I went into the difficulties very carefully, and there may be some which will not occur to you. First, there is your father to be considered."

"I certainly should not have thought of that difficulty, and you may leave my father out of the question. I should never think of asking his consent or advice about anything."

"That sweeps the obstacle away with a vengeance," Tennant said; "but is it quite wise to ignore your father?"

"I know him; you don't," answered Clara.

"Very well, father goes by the board. Then there are your friends."

"They are few enough."

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"I include acquaintances, the club girls and such like. I have nothing to say against them, they may be very pleasant in their way, but it is not your way. It would be well to leave them out of your future life."

"I do not think my friends need stand in my way," she said, after a pause. She thought of Zett, but did not speak of him.

"Then comes the study," said Tennant.

"And the money to pay for it," she said.

"Exactly; and it means hard study, remember, if you are to achieve what I expect of you. I don't want to see you a music-hall star with a tremendous reputation in the gallery and a notoriety for singing—well, risky songs. I don't want you to do that. Your friends and your surroundings will not help you. You want to be in a different atmosphere, among better people, in order that the rough edges may be rounded off. No amount of study would quite do this. I am being quite candid with you, you understand."

Clara smiled.

"You are pretty—I do not say it to flatter or as—well, you know, as a man does say such things to a girl—I am simply stating facts, good and bad; you are pretty, refined to a degree I had not expected, and with more education than girls in your station usually have; but there are little things to learn, terms of expression, small observances."

"Learn to be a lady, in short," said Clara.

"Yes, that expresses my meaning. Your father being no obstacle from your point of view, considerably lessens the difficulties. I should advise your leaving home."

"And going where?"

"Into rooms, or a house, where you could study without hindrance and get a circle of really useful acquaintances."

"And the money?"

"We would provide that."

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"There's the difficulty which is not to be got over," said Clara. "Mr. Overton will provide the money."

"I appreciate the difficulty," said Tennant; "but let us look at the matter from a business point of view. The cost will be small, a mere nothing to Overton, and you can repay him presently with interest if you like. I have spoken very plainly to-night—let me go a step further. Don't let any stupid notions stand in your way. I hate the very word propriety. It's the watchword of all the humbugs. Let us drop all question of sex; forget that you are a woman, remember only that you are an artist, and take the help offered you. Do I look like a scoundrel?"

"No, Mr. Tennant."

"Do you suppose I would come here and make this proposal if it were not an honorable one, an honest endeavor to help you to a position which is rightly yours by virtue of your gifts. Overton has the power and is willing to use it. I am his ambassador only because we thought it would be easier for you to talk the matter over with me first, seeing that I know something of you—that I discovered you, as it were. You have expressed your belief in me; well, Miss Farrow, I stake my own reputation on Overton being a man of honor."

"Look here, Mr. Tennant, the position is this, and there is no getting away from it. You have called me pretty, granted that I am not unattractive; I go to live somewhere—it doesn't matter whether it's in one room or in a dozen—at the expense of a man on whom I have no claim whatever. People will see evil in it though there is none."

"Who is to know who pays the piper?"

"Trust the next-door neighbors to find that out, and they are never very careful of your character, you know."

"My dear girl, I am not suggesting that you should have rooms in the Waterloo Road."

"The place doesn't matter," Clara answered. "If I were remarkably plain, I might be able to forget

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that I am a woman. As it is, I can't; and not being a fool, I cannot put up with the idea of living at a man's expense. That's how it is. A woman never knows when a man may be tempted to claim his reward."

"I have pledged myself with regard to Overton."

"And you may be mistaken."

"Then you refuse the help?" said Tennant.

She was silent for a few minutes. Could she possibly be in greater danger than she was under her father's roof?

"Do you expect me to give you a definite answer now?" she asked.

"No. I want you to let Overton come and see you."

"I see no harm in that."

"I will tell him," said Tennant, rising. "Don't let your opportunity slip, Miss Farrow. I shall delight in your success; and, my hand on it, you shall find a real friend in Gilbert Tennant."

She took the hand he held out to her.

"I believe that. Thank you for trying to help me."

"Don't disappoint me by refusing the help. That is all I ask. Who knows that some day you may not repay me tenfold? In the near future the whole of London may be flocking to see the great actress in Gilbert Tennant's masterpiece."

"That would be success indeed."

"Then, Miss Farrow, for my sake give it a chance. Good night."

CHAPTER IV

VICTOR DENSHAM MAKES UP HIS MIND

TENNANT wrote to Overton at his club that night, and not receiving any answer, called at the Phoenix. He was told that Mr. Overton had not been there for two or three days. Tennant then went to Sloane Street. The servant said that he believed his master was out of town, which answer Tennant construed to mean that Overton did not wish to see him just then, and had instructed his servant to do the necessary lying.

"I suppose I cannot expect Overton to be as interested in the business as I am," he thought. There was nothing to be done until he heard from him.

Having given his ambassador instructions to see Clara Farrow, and get her views with regard to a scheme for her advancement, Edward Overton dismissed the matter from his mind for the time being. He prided himself upon being able to think, as well as act, in an orderly and methodical way, and of following his own plans without ever asking advice from other people. That he generally succeeded in guiding rather than being led by others, gave him a sense of power, and lent a certain secretiveness to his actions. He was spoken of as a queer fellow, and a crank, and was not very popular. It is only fair to say that many of his acquaintances were under obligations to him, and one is seldom very friendly with the man from whom he receives favors. Owe a man a hundred pounds which you cannot repay, and you will be more than human if you do not criticise his actions as though he were your enemy. Overton's manservant knew far less about his master than most other serv-

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ants know about theirs, and when he told Tennant he believed that his master was out of town he spoke the simple truth. His master had left the house taking a bag with him, and had not returned, so he concluded that he was out of town. As it happened, the conclusion was correct.

There are men who make a habit of carefully weighing the small incidents of life, and extracting from them some lesson or point which, in the future, may be useful. They are the men, as a rule, who succeed in the world; for out of their store of facts and experience they are ready for all emergencies. Your brilliant genius fails often because of his want of detail. Edward Overton was a man of this kind. His journey out of town was the outcome of his conversation with Victor Densham in the smoking room of the Phoenix Club. Densham had declared that their interests were never likely to clash, but such a statement was not conclusive to Overton's practical mind. His experience taught him that men's lives move in very small circles, which cross and recross most unexpectedly. It was quite possible that Densham's path would cross his in the future, and as there was evidently a mystery in Densham's life, it would be as well to know what it was. The knowledge, under certain circumstances, might be of immense value.

On a voyage of discovery, therefore, Overton went down into Hampshire, to Basingstoke, and from thence took daily rides in the neighborhood, usually in the direction of Felstead. Beyond being a picturesque little village, there was nothing of particular interest about it, yet Overton spent a lot of time at the inn gossiping with the landlord. There were goodly farm lands around Felstead, and the landlord of most of them was Victor Densham of Felstead Hall, a somewhat gloomy-looking residence framed in pine woods on rising ground outside the village. From the landlord Overton learned all there was to learn about Victor Densham, which was little enough.

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"He doesn't come here as he should," said the landlord. "When a man has a property like that," and he pointed his pipe-stem in the direction of the Hall, "he ought to live in it, and spend his money among them as he receives it from."

"Is he never here?"

"Two days ago he came down for a night, and that's the first time I've set eyes on him for a twelve-month."

"I wonder he does not let it."

"Of course he ought, and give somebody a chance of making things brisker. There it is, shut up with one or two servants in it, while Mr. Densham is making the money fly in London, I warrant."

"Strange he doesn't let the house. Is there anything against the place?"

"Bless you, no. A bit somber and inconvenient, I've heard say."

"I should like to go over it. Could I manage it, do you think?"

"I don't think so. It isn't a show place. Do you happen to know Mr. Densham?"

"I have met him in town."

"Lives in style, eh?"

"Not as far as I know," said Overton. "He is not a particularly rich man, is he?"

"I can't say how the money may have leaked, but he's considered a rich man in these parts. Old Mr. Densham that was his uncle, lived up at the Hall for over forty years, and was miserly. He left everything to his nephew, and unless Mr. Victor Densham has made ducks and drakes with the money, I should say he was a very rich man indeed."

"I suppose Mr. Densham is not much liked here?"

"You can't like or dislike a man you know so little about."

"I fancy I have heard that there is some mystery about Victor Densham. Is that so?"

The landlord laughed.

"Mystery! There's no mystery. If there was any-

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thing to talk about, you may take my word for it Felstead would soon get hold of it. The female population predominates down here, and I needn't say no more than that."

This was all the information Overton could get. The servants of the house had no orders to show it to anyone, and a suggested bribe did not move them. He returned to town, having only discovered that Victor Densham was probably a much richer man than he had supposed him to be. Still, even this knowledge might be useful some day or other.

A week later he met Densham coming out of the club. He had not seen him since the night of their conversation in the smoking room.

"Have you been away?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You don't look any better for the change. You look troubled."

"Do I?"

"It strikes me so. By the way, you remember our conversation a little time ago; may I ask if you have found my advice useful?"

"Oh, yes; having got a man's advice, I have concluded to do the opposite. Rather a good plan, I think, in questions of morality."

"Hardly flattering."

"It shows that I have found your advice valuable. It has enabled me to decide. I went away to think it over, and having made up my mind, I have come back."

"To reform, I suppose."

"Reformation is rather a wide matter. I am inclined to think you would not quite understand the meaning I place upon the word. If we are both alive in twenty years, I may be able to tell you whether I have made a mistake."

"Twenty years! By Jove! it's going to be a slow process."

"Of necessity," answered Densham. "I am going

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to let conscience lead me, and see how life will turn out."

"Conscience mumbles sometimes; it is difficult to catch its meaning. Don't make a mistake, Densham."

"I have been out of town to a quiet place on purpose to hear the mumbling plainly. Try it, Overton. You'll be astonished what a poor specimen you are, when you have heard what conscience has got to say about you."

"There is something of the poet in you, Densham."

"The mad something perhaps, or maybe I am of the ancient brotherhood of the fools. They were poets, and said some good things in spite of the cap and bells." He held up his hand to a passing hansom as he spoke. "Good-by, Overton; I am going away for a long time."

"And the excuse?"

"I have none."

"Shooting big game is a very general one."

"It may come to that as a last resource."

Overton watched him get into the cab, and then entered the club. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he and Densham were destined to be enemies, and that when it came to a struggle Densham would win.

"I am inclined to think he is mad," he said, as he glanced through his letters. And then finding one from Tennant urging his immediate attention with regard to Clara Farrow, he dismissed Densham from his mind. "Poor Tennant, I must go and see him and set his mind at rest. A useful fellow and devoted to me. Clara Farrow! what a hideous name! reeks of that wax shop and the Waterloo Road. Fortunately we can change all that."

He lit a cigar and lounged back, thinking. Mad Densham! Truly no one of his friends would have dared to call him sane could they have followed him along the road conscience was leading him. It was an impossible road save to a man of strong purpose acting upon strong conviction. He was not blind to

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the fact that it might lead to the ruin of all his earthly prospects; but if it did, what matter? He had concluded that it was the right way for him to take, and he took it with a firm step and with determination. He stopped the cab in Jermyn Street.

"Wait," he said, opening a door with his latch-key.

His sitting room was on the first floor, and he found his man waiting for him there.

"Have you packed all my belongings, Parker?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you will see them safely to Felstead and——"

"And then join you, sir?"

"Later."

"I hope you do not intend getting rid of me, sir?"

"Certainly not, Parker. My movements are a little uncertain at present. You can remain at Felstead until you hear from me; or if you like, take a holiday; only leave an address where a letter can be forwarded to you."

"I shall remain at Felstead, sir."

"Very well. You will find three months' wages there," said Densham. "You will have joined me before that, I expect. Now just put this portmanteau in the cab at the door."

"Pardon my presumption, sir, but there is nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing, Parker."

The man took the portmanteau, and Densham glanced round the room. It had been the scene of many a gathering of the friends he was voluntarily giving up. Many a toast had been drunk there to eyes as sparkling as the wine that glistened in the glasses. Many a jest had wakened ringing laughter, merriment as careless as the morality of the jest. If a regret touched him, he thrust it back, and remembered only that night five years ago when he had stood in this room satisfied that he had done a good action. He had blotted out the good in it since then. This was

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why he had elected to follow conscience in an attempt to right the wrong.

He threw a light overcoat across his arm and descended the stairs.

"Where shall I tell him to drive to, sir?" asked Parker.

"Down Piccadilly."

In Piccadilly he told the man to drive to Kensington—Bernard Mansions.

The porter at the Mansions touched his hat, and carried the portmanteau to the lift, and the lift-man carried it to the door of No. 2, fourth floor. Denham had a key, but he did not use it; he knocked.

The servant threw the door wide open.

"Is your mistress in?"

"Yes, sir."

He gave her his hat and coat, and, as he did so, a room door opened, and a woman came out.

"Victor!"

She drew him into the room and closed the door before she kissed him.

"You have been a long time away from me."

"I could not help it, Kate. Business."

"Are you sure it was business?"

"I am quite sure that it was not pleasure."

She accepted the compliment which he did not intend, and laughed.

"And now you are going to stay?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"That depends on you. I have come to have a serious talk with you."

"Oh, Victor! How nasty! Last time you talked seriously, and the time before that, and you know I hate being serious."

"You have got to be serious this time, Kate; but I hope and I think you will be glad to be so."

"It's not about my bills, then?"

"Have I ever complained?"

"Well, I thought you winced over Madame Paul-

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ine's last account—little account, as she called it. My dear boy, I don't wonder; it was a villainous robbery. I am not going to her any more. I'm going to make my own dresses in future."

"I shouldn't, Kate, if I were you."

"You don't trust my taste?"

"Well, Madame Pauline has had more experience."

"Ah! but some day it might be useful to know how to make my own dresses. Changes come, and then——"

"And then?" queried Densham.

She looked at him curiously.

"And then?" he repeated.

"Let us have some tea first," she said, ringing the bell. "You must not ask me to be serious too suddenly."

She spoke lightly, but her lips tightened as she turned to take some books from the table to make room for the tea tray.

"Very well, after tea," said Densham, taking a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece and lighting it.

The woman was pretty. Men said so without hesitation. There are flowers whose beauty cannot be denied, hothouse flowers, and yet there is something about them, an artificiality perhaps, or a perfume, which after a time makes one long for a more simple blossom, a fragrance less pronounced. She was like such flowers. Her prettiness was too definite, almost as if it were demanding recognition every moment. Art lent her a little color, and powder, deftly used, softened her complexion. She was beautifully dressed, possibly more to Densham's taste than her own. He had been with her to Madame Pauline's on two or three occasions, and she understood and toned down her fair client's love for color and contrast.

"You look serious enough now, Kate," said Densham presently, putting down his teacup.

"I believe I feel serious. You have caught me in a new mood. I wonder——"

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"Well, go on. You wonder——"

"I wonder what would have happened if I had always been serious. I don't think you would have cared for me so much. We shouldn't have had such a good time together."

"Probably not. You would have fallen in love with some good honest fellow and——"

"And married him, and been miserable. Don't talk like that, Victor. It has been a good time, hasn't it?"

"Men usually pigeonhole such episodes that way, I believe."

"Just so. Everything has to have an end."

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Oh, my seriousness, I suppose; put it down to that."

"Come and sit over here, Kate, and listen to me."

He put the cushions comfortably behind her in the corner of the sofa, and then sat down beside her.

"Kate, do you remember the night you and I first met, five years ago?"

"Remember it! My dear, I began to live that night. Do you want to forget it?"

"Not that night—no. I went home feeling that I had at least one good action to my credit. I had held out a helping hand to a woman in great distress, and I meant to be a friend to her always."

"You have been."

"Not in the way I intended," Densham answered, with a grim smile.

"I should probably have gone to the devil if it hadn't been for you. There are not many ways open to a betrayed woman left penniless in London. My false friend, however, did me a service, for I found you."

"Do you know what I determined to do that night?" he asked.

"Fall in love with me," was the prompt answer.

"I meant to protect you, care for you, love you as I would have loved a sister had I had one."

"I am glad you changed your mind and loved me

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in another way. I shouldn't have appreciated the brotherly affection. Is that a very awful confession to make?"

She drew him down to her and kissed him. There was passion in her action; it roused no passion in the man.

"You have been very good to me, Victor."

"Have I?" he said earnestly. "I do not think an impartial judge would say so. You talk as though you had escaped from the road to the devil; you haven't—I have been helping you along it for the last five years."

"Don't preach, Victor; it doesn't suit you."

"I am serious, Kate, and you must listen to me. I have been little, if any, better than the scoundrel who deserted you. All my good intentions came to nothing. I wasn't strong enough to rise above the dead level of other men. You were a pretty woman, I was a very ordinary man. It was the old story over again."

"And you are tired of it. I think I understand."

"You understand! Do you regret it too?"

"Regret! Do you suppose I should confess it if I did? But I don't. I have had a good time, lived in the sunshine, laughed, and been merry to my heart's content, and I shall again. God made different kinds of women, I suppose, and I am one of the merrier sort. I don't envy the good and virtuous woman who becomes a silly trusting wife and slave of a mother. I pity such. I know what the husbands are like. There is nothing of the sackcloth and ashes penitent about me. I have lived, and I shall go on living to the end. The part of the faded woman creeping home in a snowstorm to be forgiven does not appeal to me a bit. Don't you worry, Victor. You're tired of it all."

"My dear Kate, you don't understand."

"Oh, yes, I do," she answered, getting up and taking a cigarette from the box on the mantelpiece. "Give me a light. Thanks. I understand well enough. You'll find me reasonable. There'll be no complaining, no scene, no tears, and you needn't be afraid that

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I shall make myself unpleasant. The other woman is not going to try and make your wife miserable. Is she pretty? But of course she is. I wonder if she loves you as much as I do."

"Listen to me, Kate," said Densham, rising and taking her hands in his. "You don't understand. You and I have begun life at the wrong end——"

"For Heaven's sake, don't preach, Victor. Come to the point. Say it out. Admit the good time, and declare that it must end. These sort of things always do end. I've known that from the beginning. I am sorry it cannot go on, but there—don't imagine I regret that it has been. I don't."

"We have begun at the wrong end," Densham went on, taking no notice of her outburst. "We have got our lives into a bit of a tangle, but the mess is not so great that it cannot be put right. I want to begin gathering up the ragged edges, and you must help me. Will you be my wife?"

"Marry you?"

There was a catch in her voice. She had expected a very different proposition, had been ready to accept the situation and make the best terms she could for herself.

"Don't you care enough for me to marry me?"

"Yes, Victor," she answered, her manner softening; "only I want time to think. I never thought you would want to marry me."

"No. I gather that you expected me to break off the connection, make some golden atonement for the past, and go out of your life as completely as though I had never come into it."

"I could only judge by the experiences of other women, Victor."

"I am not blaming you, Kate. It happens that I am not quite like other men. I have not the knack of forgetting the past, of rolling it up like an old manuscript and burning it. You and I have started on a journey together. You came with me because I asked you. Is it very strange that I should wish to give

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you the full privileges a woman has a right to demand in such circumstances? I ought to have done so before."

"I made no demands, Victor."

"You have been unselfish enough not to."

"And you really want to marry me?"

"I do. I will try and be as good a husband to you as I have been a lover."

"And you won't be too hard with me if I disappoint you sometimes?"

"My dear Kate, why should I be? I suppose most husbands and wives disappoint each other occasionally, but they are very good friends for all that."

"And you won't drop the lover altogether just because you are my husband. A lot of married men do that, you know. It's all very well while a woman is free to change her mind, but afterwards——"

"That argument hardly applies to us, does it, Kate?" said Densham.

"Perhaps not. I am forgetting all the circumstances. I have never felt like a very bad woman, but to-night you have made me feel almost like an innocent girl."

"Then we have made one big step in the right direction," said Densham, taking her hands.

"I don't want to spoil your life, Victor."

"You will not do that."

"Your relations—your friends?"

"I have no relations and very few friends. We will go abroad for a little time, and I shall come back bringing a wife with me. There will be no one to know that you and I have a past."

"Then we'll be married," she said, kissing him. "When is it to be?"

"To-morrow."

"Oh, Victor!"

"I have the license. I have arranged all the details of our journey. There is no need for delay. Don't imagine, Kate, that this marriage is a sudden idea of mine. I have been thinking of it seriously for weeks."

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"You might have told me before."

"I thought it best to settle everything first. You will be ready at twelve to-morrow."

"Yes."

"I will come for you at that time. Good night."

He took her in his arms.

"Good night, Kitty; I'll make you as happy as I can."

"We are to begin life afresh, aren't we?"

"Quite afresh."

"I hope you will never regret it very much."

"We must be gentle with each other," he answered.

"I think we shall manage to get a good hold on happiness then."

She went to the door with him, and watched him get into the lift.

"Mrs. Victor Densham," she said, as she went back to the room. She lit a cigarette, and looked at herself in the glass. "Mrs. Victor Densham. Had I been a designing woman, it would never have happened. I am rewarded for my good nature, but at the same time I hope poor Victor doesn't expect too much. He's taken to preaching a bit lately, but I'll alter all that before long! I don't believe in Victor's reformation much. Men don't reform. He's got an idea that he's going to lose me, that's why he wants me to marry him. Well, it suits us, eh, Mrs. Victor Densham, it suits us very well indeed," and she nodded knowingly to her reflection in the glass.

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSE IN HARMONY ROAD

HAD it been possible for Gilbert Tennant to be thoroughly irritable about anything, he would have been at not seeing or hearing from Overton. He thoroughly believed in Clara Farrow's ability, and the money question, which he had hardly considered a difficulty, worried him. He admired her independence, but he was exceedingly anxious that the scheme should not fall through. He went as far as considering the advisability of proposing Clara Farrow as a lodger to his wife, but the idea was not put into words. He remembered his wife's little peculiarities, as he called them, and the idea dissolved in a smile.

Had Tennant been as businesslike about his own affairs as he was in his endeavors to help other people, he would probably have been, as Overton often told him, a more successful man. He was a good-natured dreamer who invariably thought of himself last, a virtue no doubt in the abstract, but one which does not help a man to get on in life, and Mrs. Tennant was aware of the fact. The knowledge was the cause of her little peculiarities. Her husband's erratic comings and goings, his periods of apparent idleness and his equally lengthy periods of hard work, his sunny disposition and unvarying good spirits when there seemed every reason for depression and melancholy, had long ago ceased to surprise her. She had talked to him and at him, in season and out of it too, during the whole seven years of their married life, and although she had no intention of giving up this privilege, she had long ago given up expecting any result. Mrs. Tennant's complaints were reasonable, Gilbert ad-

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mitted that they were, but in the same breath declared that he was too old to reform, and called his little son and daughter to witness that he spoke the truth. Many a little domestic scene had had the curtain effectually dropped upon it by such an appeal, which was always followed by a glorious romp with father. Six-year-old Mavis and four-year-old Frank didn't want father altered a bit. Why Frank? somebody had asked once; why not Gilbert? Mrs. Tennant's answer had been promptness itself—"One Gilbert Tennant is quite enough in the world." She never knew how the remark had hurt, and, besides, it was not true. The world would be all the better and cleaner for a few more Gilbert Tennants.

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Tennant did not mean nearly all she said. To hear her sometimes, one would have imagined that Gilbert was a burly ruffian who never did any work, who had no thought for his children, who never said a kind word to his wife except by mistake, and that the home in Harmony Road was more like a pigsty than anything else, where, as often as not, there was little to eat. The real state of affairs was a different matter. There was probably no house in the neighborhood more pleasant to go into, nor one more tastefully furnished. Three times a day unfailingly did the neat servant lay the cloth in the dining room, and although such a banquet as Dives loved may not have been set upon it, there was sufficient to have sharpened the appetite of a far less miserable beggar than Lazarus.

Why Mrs. Tennant's complaints, then?

Gilbert Tennant, author, dramatist, poet, musician, everything a little, nothing much, as he himself put it, was inconsequential. In his young days he had got into debt, and he had never thoroughly got out of it. He made money, but there was always leeway to make up, bills to be paid which ought to have been settled months ago. There were times when creditors became pressing. Gilbert was not troubled; the creditors must do as better men had done before them—wait; but

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with Mrs. Tennant it was different. To her, unpaid bills were so many crimes. The constant want of ready money was trying enough; but when, in spite of his own difficulties, Gilbert would persist in lending to needy friends, Mrs. Tennant very rightly considered that she had cause to complain. Such folly was altogether beyond her comprehension, and she treated her husband to appalling pictures of the future, the prominent features of which were starving children and the workhouse. On these occasions Gilbert always started a romp with the children, possibly to show his wife how healthy they were, and suggested that the needy friend he had helped would probably return the compliment when he saw him in such dire distress. Gilbert Tennant was not practical; his wife was. She was passionately fond of him, and he knew it, but she did not believe in his genius. Genuine merit, she argued, brought its reward regularly in solid cash, while the results of Gilbert's pen were small and of a spasmodic nature. She was convinced that if her husband could get a good clerkship with a thoroughly sound firm, he would rise steadily and do well.

"And what would you consider a good clerkship, Mary?" Gilbert asked her, when she had persisted in this view on one occasion.

"Two hundred a year, paid monthly, and a prospect."

"Yes, I believe that would be a fair salary for a beginner, but I made more than that last year."

"It did not come into the house."

"Well, there was poor old Cobham, you know; I certainly let him have a bit when I got the check for the novel. He was ill, and without a sixpence, and I have known him for half a dozen years."

"You have known me longer than that, and I ought to come first. Last year I did not have a single new dress."

"Well, my dear, why should you; you didn't want one."

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Mrs. Tennant could find no adequate answer to this piece of crass ignorance.

"The fact is, Mary, I am no more fit to take a clerkship than a clerk is to take my work. It takes time to be really successful, but I'm on the road. The papers are beginning to recognize that there is such a person as your unworthy husband. I shall make a hit directly, and then you'll have so many gowns you will be giving some of them away to a female Cobham."

And after this reassuring prophecy Gilbert went to his study to write an article to pay the water rate. It would never do to have the supply cut off. He laughed as he thought of what Mrs. Tennant would say to such a proceeding.

Following his endeavors to find Overton, Tennant had one of his periods of hard work. He had a novel and a play on hand, besides having to keep certain papers and magazines, to which he was a regular contributor, going. The small but timely checks had helped him over many an awkward stile.

He was hard at it one morning, giving his villain a bad quarter of an hour, when the servant announced:

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"Overton! Upon my word I thought you were dead. You got my letters?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not answer them? Sit down," and Tennant bundled a heap of papers and magazines from the armchair on to the floor. "I hate writing letters, you know; you might have answered them."

"It did not seem to me that they required answering."

"I thought you would be anxious to know how I had got on."

"I am not given to being anxious about anything," said Overton, with a smile.

"I undertook a somewhat delicate mission at your suggestion. I naturally supposed you would be interested in the result."

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"Quite so; but that is no reason to worry. I thought it might be worth while to spend a little money over the girl, but I was in no violent hurry to do so. The world is not actually waiting on tiptoe for the advent of Miss Farrow, you know."

"I thought you were more enthusiastic about her than that," said Tennant, with some disappointment. "The whole scheme seems likely to fall through, for if you are not violently anxious to part with your money, she is just as little inclined to accept it."

"So you said in your letter. You put the case very clearly. I have been out of town on business, but I have found time to call and see your protégée."

"You have seen her! And what do you think of her now?"

"A woman of character certainly."

"I told you so."

"And may go far if properly handled."

"Exactly my opinion."

"But all the same, she may fail," said Overton. "It is not well to have too independent a spirit in the life we contemplate putting her into. In no other calling, possibly, has one so often to put pride in the pocket."

"She is a pretty woman, Overton; it is as well she should have plenty of pride to protect herself."

"If she wasn't pretty she would not be worth the speculation. Whoever heard of an ugly actress?"

"No, but still——"

"Come, Tennant, would you have been interested in her talent had you not first been caught by her beauty?"

"Certainly I should. I am not sure she can lay claim to being beautiful."

"That is your want of artistic perception," Overton answered. "There is a lot of the child in you still. You are pleased and you have opinions, yet you really do not know why you are the one or have the others. And you certainly do not understand women; I have noticed it in your writings; you see

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I do read you sometimes. For instance, this money difficulty, which you appeared to think so insurmountable; a little judicious handling soon made Miss Farrow regard it in the right light. She is anxious now, I assure you, to begin her new existence."

"I am glad of it. I hope we are acting wisely."

"Why such a doubt now?"

"I hardly know."

"There peeps out your childishness, my dear fellow."

"It is my very ripe manhood rather than childishness," Tennant answered. "I sometimes think I do not understand women, but I do understand men. It is not very wonderful that I should have misgivings about the wisdom of taking an attractive woman out of her obscurity and thrusting her into the strong light of fame."

"It is rather late in the day to think about the matter, isn't it? It was entirely your own idea. I am the tool merely."

The door opened, and Mrs. Tennant came in.

"I beg your pardon. I thought you were alone."

"Come in, Mary. This is Edward Overton, a very good friend of mine—my wife, Overton."

"I have heard my husband speak of you."

"Kindly, I hope. I have the temerity to disturb the lion in his den, you see."

"I don't consider Gilbert much of a lion," said Mrs. Tennant.

"But he is, I assure you, and destined to be a strong animal into the bargain. I lecture your husband sometimes for doing work which is unworthy of him."

"A dog would no doubt enjoy a leg of mutton, but usually he has to be contented with the bone," said Gilbert.

"My husband seems to have a hard time, then, for I lecture him too."

"Quite right, Mrs. Tennant. There are plenty of literary hacks. We expect something better than hack-work from Gilbert."

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"The new novel," laughed the author, laying his hand on the manuscript sheets. "Every chapter is ringing the knell of my successful predecessors."

"Your lecturing is evidently clumsily concealed flattery, Mr. Overton; mine is hardly flattering, is it, Gilbert?"

"I am not so sure of that, dear. You give me credit for being able to do all kinds of things I am totally unfitted for. My wife thinks I should make an excellent clerk, Overton."

"Really, Mrs. Tennant!"

"Perhaps my nature is rather commercial, Mr. Overton. Literature as a hobby I can understand, but it appears to me poor stuff to open a shop with. Even if you can put something like genius in the window as an attraction, one can never be certain that it is the real article, there are so many cheap imitations about, and such a lot of injudicious friends to advertise them."

"Your husband's is the real article, Mrs. Tennant."

"Then why doesn't somebody come and buy at a fair price?"

"There you are, Overton; answer that question if you can," said Gilbert. "Why don't they come and buy? What is the use of genius of the finest quality if nobody wants to buy it?"

"Wait a little and I prophesy the reward, Mrs. Tennant," said Overton. "I should imagine it to be far easier to be the wife of an ordinary man than of a genius, but you will not regret choosing the harder part."

"Regret! I said nothing about regretting. I married for love; it never occurred to me that I was marrying a genius."

"And what is more to the point, you do not believe you have," said Gilbert. "Well, if the worst comes we must be commercial, and have an after-season sale at reduced prices. You think such a lot of me, Overton, you might like to pick up a lump of genius cheap."

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Mrs. Tennant laughed, and saying that she had some work to do, which might imply that her husband and his visitor were wasting their time, she left the room.

"That's the best little woman in the world," said Tennant, as the door closed upon her.

"Rather practical," suggested Overton.

"Luckily, I don't know where we should be if she wasn't. After all, the price paid for your work is its value, so far as you are concerned, isn't it? My wife estimates mine that way."

"Rather trying sometimes, isn't it?"

"To her, I should think so. I don't like to think of it. I am always in a muddle; am a perfect champion at letting things slide, and allowing to-morrow to look after itself. Fancy a man like that let loose upon a woman who is order personified!"

"Is there any special trouble?" asked Overton. "I could——"

"My dear Overton, I am glad of your help, your good word and so forth; but your money, or anyone else's for that matter, I will not borrow. My creditor might some day ask a favor which might not quite agree with my ideas of honor. I want to be in a position to refuse. Thanks all the same."

"You are suspicious."

"Experienced, Overton. Are you going?"

"Yes; it is nearly lunch time."

"And what is the next move with regard to Miss Farrow?"

"Walk down the street with me and I will tell you."

Harmony Road was eminently respectable if a little monotonous. The houses, a long continuous row on either side, were all alike, and exhibited few attempts at individuality by their various occupiers. It must have been difficult sometimes to say which house was yours and which was next door. When will some enterprising builder fashion a suburban street which shall look picturesque? Possibly Overton found the

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monotony depressing, for he said suddenly, pointing to a house on the other side of the road:

"There is some taste being displayed there."

A different style of front door had been put in, graced with a wrought-iron knocker, and a small wrought-iron lamp hung in the porch. The paint work was an artistic green, and there were Dutch-tiled window-boxes.

"And a good deal of money being spent over it, too," answered Tennant. "So you have overcome all Miss Farrow's prejudices?"

"Of course. We are offering her an opportunity of being admired, and there are few women who will not jump at that."

"I don't think mere admiration will satisfy her." They had walked to the top of the road and turned back again. "I hardly think you understand her, Overton."

"I have had a good deal of experience in judging my fellow-creatures."

"But you do not often talk so cynically about them as you do about Miss Farrow."

"You have not been interested in the others; you are in Clara Farrow; that makes the difference. Yes, I like that house immensely. It makes the rest of the road quite shabby. Who lives there?"

"I don't know. Somebody just come in, I think. And when is Miss Farrow to leave home?"

"That reminds me of my chief reason for coming to see you to-day," said Overton. "She is going to dine with us next Friday, when we are to make final arrangements. That old reprobate, her father, must know nothing of her whereabouts."

"Where do we dine?"

"There is a small Italian place, left-hand side of the Strand, going toward Charing Cross from Wellington Street; one is not likely to meet anybody particular there. You see I am not acquainted with the extent or taste of Miss Farrow's wardrobe."

"I go bail for her taste."

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"Enthusiast! You would go bail for anything connected with her. I like to be careful, and I should not choose to be seen dining with a lady in a bright blue skirt and a yellow bodice."

Tennant laughed as they turned to walk up the road again. He remembered Clara Farrow as she had appeared when he called upon her.

"And what arrangements are you making for her?" Tennant asked.

"I have a sort of pensioner upon my hands, a very estimable old lady; I propose to let her live with our diva as watch-dog. I like that house more every time I look at it."

"Bother the house! I want to get at the bottom of our business. What is the chaperon's name?"

"Lambert. I vouch for her; but, if you like, I can favor you with further references."

"Don't be absurd, Overton."

"You are full of suspicions this morning. Now the business is practically brought to a successful issue, you seem to regret that it was ever commenced. You should have thought all about the wisdom of the affair before you asked my advice and took me to that girls' club."

"I only want to safeguard the girl," answered Tennant; "we are responsible for her now in more ways than one."

"Don't let us magnify our duty. I will help her to success, but there my responsibility ends. I cannot undertake to be answerable for a pretty and famous woman's vagaries."

"But as a man of the world, Overton——"

"But I am not one. I hate the expression, and candidly I do not exactly know what it means. There is a fellow at the Phoenix— By the way, did you ever meet a man called Victor Densham?"

"No."

"Well, he would call me a man of the world the other night, and then asked for my advice from that particular standpoint. Rather like sticking a pin

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through a moth and then asking him why he doesn't fly. Instead of worrying about responsibility and that kind of rubbish, you set to work and write half a dozen good songs for Miss Farrow—something after the style of thing she did at the club that night. If she makes a hit, your songs will be worth money. That will be a return at once for your philanthropy."

"I believe I am poet and musician enough to knock a comic song together."

"My dear fellow, I have faith in you. You can do most things if you try. You must not let your wife's doubts take the heart out of you."

"I don't; but my limitations appear to grow narrower as I get older. You haven't told me where Miss Farrow is to live."

Overton laughed.

"I had forgotten, and in another moment I should have hurried off without telling you. I don't know about the narrowing of your limitations, but I do know that my memory is beginning to play me tricks. I have taken the house yonder, which we admire so much, for Miss Farrow. Mrs. Lambert is already in possession. Go over and look at it when you have time. I told her you would probably call. She knows all the circumstances."

CHAPTER VI

THE PAST IS LEFT BEHIND

THE dinner was a success, so far as it went. Dreading, probably, a bright blue skirt and yellow bodice, Overton had engaged a private room, and the proprietor himself was careful of the comfort of the party. Overton need have had no misgivings. Clara came in the frock Tennant had seen her in, and her only ornament was a bunch of violets in her waistband. The business part of the meeting, however, was not so successful. Clara listened to all the plans made for her, and yet could not be induced to take the step she was asked to take.

"I can't decide to-night," she said.

Tennant persuaded. Overton shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, my dear girl, it is just as you like," he said. "I have done my part. There is the house for you; the necessary funds will be forthcoming, and you have your chance. I can do no more."

"You are very kind to do so much."

"Well, Tennant here believes in you—perhaps, if I speak quite plainly, more than I do. I have a certain respect for Tennant's judgment, and am willing to do my part. If you decide not to accept the help offered, it is of no great consequence. I can easily get rid of the house again, and, even if I lose a little in the transaction, I am rich enough not to mind. The matter, therefore, entirely rests with you," and he sipped his claret, having said the last word he had to say upon the subject.

"You must come, Miss Farrow," said Tennant. "I have a really selfish interest in you. I cannot

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help thinking that you are going to help me to fame."

"I expect you'll be disappointed," Clara answered; "but I don't think I shall let Mr. Overton get rid of his house. I think I shall say yes. Will you give me three days to decide?"

"Yes," said Tennant.

"And where shall I write to tell you?"

"You need not write," said Overton. "Mrs. Lambert is expecting you. You have only to knock at the door and walk in. But, remember the one stipulation—nobody, neither your father nor any of your former acquaintances, is to know your address."

"I shan't forget. Then it's settled, if I don't come in three days—that'll be on Monday night—I'm not coming at all. And if I do come, you won't blame me if I turn out a failure?"

"You will not do that," said Tennant.

Clara went thoughtfully home. Her father was out. The shop and the little back parlor looked more miserable than ever. Two or three dirty plates and an empty tumbler were upon the table, the remains of her father's meal. She raked the fire into a glow and sat down before it. What was it held her back? The old life grew more hateful every day, and yet she feared to cross the threshold of the new one open to her.

"You're alone?"

The voice startled her, and she turned quickly to see a shaggy head thrust into the room.

"Yes, Zett, quite alone and tired."

"That's bad. I'm never tired."

The dwarf seated himself on a low three-legged stool close to the fire and looked at Clara. There was something of an animal's affection in the look—dumb, uncomplaining affection. Often he came in the evening when she was alone, and sat looking at her, hardly saying a word.

"You think I came just to enjoy the fire, don't you?" he said presently.

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"No, I thought you came to see me. She answered with a smile.

"I came to talk to you particular. I ain't seen so much of you lately as I used to."

"That's your fault."

"No, it ain't. I can see you don't care so much about me as you did."

"Nonsense, Zett."

He shook his head solemnly.

"I may be a dwarf, but I ain't a fool. You've got something on your mind, Clara."

"What fancy have you got in your head now, Zett?"

"No fancy. You've been out with a swell to-night, feeding yonder."

He jerked his head in the direction of the river.

"You've been spying on me."

"No, I warn't doin' that. Seemed to me more like being ready to protect you."

"Protect me!" she sneered. "I'll thank you not to follow me for the future."

"Can't promise," answered Zett resolutely. "Seems to me that's what I'm for, to look arter you. Can't see any other use I am. I saw you go over the bridge, and I followed. I saw you meet him at that eating-place. Who is he?"

"That's my affair."

"And it's mine too. If he's all right, an' a straight 'un, very well; but if he's a wrong 'un—" His strong fingers worked convulsively as though an enemy's throat were between them.

"You little fool! He's straight enough."

Clara was angry, and she looked contemptuously at the crooked figure doubled up at her feet. The words struck home with the cruelty of a dagger-thrust, and found the great heart hidden in the deformed body.

He scrambled to his feet and picked up his cap.

"I told you you was different to what you used to

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be. You wouldn't have said that to me once. Good night."

"Come back, Zett. I didn't mean that."

"It's the words one don't mean which hurts most. They slip out like a thought dropped by mistake."

"Sit down, Zett, and don't be a fool. You made me angry. I'm not going to be spied on, and you're not my keeper."

"Yes, I am. I'd stretch out a hand to help any one I saw going to the devil."

"I've not started that road yet, but it seems I'm bound to do so sooner or later. I'm to become the talk of the town somehow or other."

"Who said that?"

"You seem to think I'm in the fair way of it, and my father constantly suggests it."

"Beast! Coward! Liar!" hissed the dwarf.

"Hush, Zett."

"I'd say it to his face."

"That wouldn't hurt him. Did you ever think this was a home to be proud of, Zett?"

"I only know it's better than mine."

"That's where you make a mistake. I'm tired of it, Zett; sick of it. If I go on living here, that road to the devil will soon know me. I shall cross the bridge some day toward the light and the life, and I shall not come back. I shall forget the past like a bad dream."

"And me?"

"No, I shall not forget you," said the girl, with sudden tenderness.

"But the light and life, as you call them, are not for me, he answered; "I'm laughed at here—there?—No, Clara, I'll have to stay this side the bridge."

They were silent for a few moments.

"See here, Zett," she said suddenly, "am I beautiful?"

"I always think so."

"My father tells me so every day; beautiful, attractive, and wasting it all in a draper's shop in the Borough. Men are fools, lavish with their wealth

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where a beautiful woman is concerned. Think of the splendor and the glitter of it! Gold, love, worship—mine now for the asking. Why should I not take it all?"

"I'll kill any one who hurts you," said the dwarf.

"It's a nice home where the father talks like that, isn't it, Zett?" she went on excitedly; "a nice home to hurry back to in the evening. I'll tell you a secret, Zett. There is a way out of it."

"That man you went to see to-night?"

Clara nodded.

"You don't mean to do it!" he exclaimed passionately. "You won't do it, Clara!"

"Don't be a fool, Zett. That man and another want to help me. That is why I went to see them to-night. I haven't quite made up my mind yet, but I think I shall go. They want to make a singer of me, and if they succeed I'll bury Clara Farrow and call myself——"

"What?"

"Some name that sounds well and looks grand on a poster."

The dwarf shook his head.

"Won't you be glad if I'm successful?"

"I don't like it. It don't seem natural. Do you mind the last night you and I crossed the bridge together? Do you mind the women we saw waiting under the gas-lamps yonder, painted and scented? They call themselves by names that sound well."

The girl started as if he had struck her.

"You insult me, Zett."

"Some of 'em started out the same way as you talk of. They found a to-day with gold in it, but they've reached to-morrow now."

"You insult me," she repeated, but she spoke less harshly.

He sat looking at her for some time, wondering in what channel his words had set her thoughts running.

"You find it easy to think evil of me," she said presently.

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"I only want to help you. I'm deformed, ugly, and all that, but you'd do better to marry me than cross the bridge for the last time."

"Perhaps, Zett."

"It couldn't be, could it? I'd work for you night and day; I'd be your slave. I heard a parson talkin' once of a man as loved everybody so much that he died for 'em, an' he couldn't do no more than that. I'd love like him, but I'd only love you. You shouldn't have no tears that I could help, an' if you loved anything, I'd love it too. I shouldn't remember any more what I was like 'cos your beauty would do for both of us, and I don't suppose folks would call me ugly when they see that you cared about me. We'd go away somewhere, where gold warn't everything, and I think we'd get on, Clara."

He stopped, but she did not speak.

"I wonder why I was made like what I am?"

"Because, Zett— Oh, I don't know why, but you are better than other men."

"You say that! You mean that!—but you couldn't love me?"

A strange wooer this, with nothing to recommend him but his earnestness and the great heart hidden away somewhere which the girl did not really appreciate. She did not answer. How could she?

"I'll go," he said suddenly. "I wish I was straight-backed as others are. Seems a pity that if our backs are different our feelings shouldn't be different too. Good night, Clara. There's an ugly little beast who's only got one friend in the world to love, and if you wants him you knows where to find him."

He went through the shop, and at the door met Jacob Farrow coming in.

"What the devil do you want here?" Farrow spoke thickly. He had been drinking.

"I came to see Clara."

"She don't want an ugly beast like you hanging around her. Get out, or I'll have you locked up for trespassing."

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An angry answer remained unspoken. It was not worth while to quarrel with a drunken man, especially when it might make things harder for Clara. Zett went home to his garret and surveyed himself in the broken looking-glass which hung on the wall.

"I might be better-looking, there's no denying," he reflected, "but I couldn't be no fonder of Clara than I am. I expects there's men in the world more ugly than what I am, only she don't happen to 'ave seen 'em."

Farrow shut the shop door with a bang. Before he lurched into the parlor Clara knew the state he was in.

"You asked that little beast in here?"

"Yes, and shall again," she answered defiantly.

"D—d impertinence, I call it; but then, what's it signify? You're a beautiful woman, and a beautiful woman can say and do what she likes all the world over."

"You're drunk."

"Excited—that's all—only excited. Did I shut the door? I don't want the Prime Minister to be stolen in the night—national calamity, eh? You're a beautiful woman; everybody says so. Don't you be a fool, Clara. You make the most of it."

"Stop that!"

"Think it over. Don't you make up your mind without thinking it over," and he tried to take hold of her.

"Don't touch me," she said, stepping back from him.

"Getting proud, eh?" he answered.

"Impossible, with you for a father."

"You're a sly 'un, you are. You'll get on. I ain't got my eyes shut."

The girl turned round sharply and faced him. There was a fierce question in her flashing eyes, and it roused the man more than any words could have done.

"You're proud; that's what it is. You've taken no

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notice of what your father's said; but somebody else has been telling you what beauty's worth, and you believe him."

"Beast! Liar!" she hissed, and she struck him full in the face with all the strength of an infuriated woman. The drunken man staggered back against the table and slipped to the floor. Clara looked at him to make sure that she had not seriously hurt him, and then she went to her bedroom.

"This settles it," she said, as she locked her door. She experienced no feeling of regret. She had no anxiety about the effect of the blow which her still tingling knuckles told her had been a severe one. She had struck a coarse, brutal liar, that was all. Her conscience acquitted her.

There was no sleep for her that night. It was the last night of life as she had known it. The dawn slowly coming was for her a new birth. As the first light crept over the roofs she dressed herself in the best gown she had. It was a day for holiday attire. She put a few clothes into a dilapidated bag, a few worthless articles she valued just enough not to leave behind; and her little store of money she put carefully in her pocket.

"Is that all?" she said, looking round the room.

In a tray on the table lay a small circular wooden brooch, a tree and a cottage roughly carved upon it. It was valueless, and the pin was broken, but she dropped it into her pocket. A tender, womanly thought struggled into a deep corner of her heart and hid there, a link to bind her to at least one figure of the past. Zett had given her the brooch years ago.

Then she went softly down the stairs. The parlor was empty. Her father had evidently recovered sufficiently to stagger to bed sometime during the night. She went through the shop, not without a shudder. In the early grayness, the fixed eyes staring at her out of the waxen faces looked ghastly. She remembered how often she had been frightened of them. She had done with them now forever. She stood upon the

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damp pavement and closed the door quietly behind her.

The footsteps of an early worker, or a late reveler, echoed from the distance. Clara glanced up and down the street, and then hurried into the Waterloo Road, and turned toward the bridge.

She was free. The keen morning air sang of freedom in her ears. The tide, swirling round the barges in the river, murmured to her of freedom. The great city, mystical in the gray dawn, was full of possibilities. There were no women with painted faces and artificial smiles standing under the gas-lamps now to remind her of Zett's warning. This should be a holiday, a new birthday. The past was behind; she would forget it. The future was before her. What was she destined to find in it?

CHAPTER VII

OLIVE VAUGHAN

THE young year was still chilly, and it was dusk early. To-day a fog had hung heavily over the city, so it was dark by four o'clock. Lights shone brightly in most of the windows in the street, but only a fitful fire-flame lit up the first-floor windows of 99B Jermyn Street. The occupant had sat for an hour past, lying back in an ample easy-chair, his legs stretched out to the fire, his eyes fixed on the glowing embers. He had been smoking, but his cigar had gone out, and he had not troubled to light it again. The fire pictures had been too absorbing, although not exactly pleasant, to judge by the expression upon the man's face, which had set into hard lines about the mouth, and there was a stern determination in his eyes. It was not an afternoon reverie which had molded the expression of the face. It had been longer in the making than that, and yet it did not seem indelibly fixed. Circumstances had fashioned a mask for him, and it was possible that other circumstances might fashion another in its place. The face was rather that of a man who was fighting strenuously with an enemy than of one who had fought a battle and would carry the marks of it to his life's end.

The flames died out of the fire, and the glowing embers settled into dull cinders before he roused himself.

"Such a day would give any man the blues," he said, as though apologizing for his fit of depression. "I wish I were back in Switzerland, or Italy, or anywhere but here." He switched on the light, and it caused a change in his reflection. "After all, Italy

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was not a great success. London is a far better Lethe. I make too little use of my opportunities. If one can lie easier on the bed he has made for himself by throwing another blanket over it, he's a fool not to do so."

He addressed this last remark to his reflection in a glass, and paused almost as though he expected an answer. Then he took up his cigar and relit it.

"Dinner and a theater," he said, picking up a paper and looking down the advertisements. He evidently did not know what was being played just then. "This should suit my humor; a musical play which has taken half a dozen librettists and a trio of musicians to concoct. Lyrics by Gilbert Tennant. Who is Gilbert Tennant, I wonder? Some poor devil of a poet whose guineas are scarcer than his verses, I warrant. So long as the tunes are lively, the poetry does not matter much. 'The Girl of Bagdad.' I'll make her acquaintance to-night."

As a matter of fact, he did not see "The Girl of Bagdad" that night. The curtain was designed to rise upon a different drama, one in which the Fates had cast him for a leading part. How seldom we reflect that within the next hour the curtain may rise on the real tragedy or comedy of our lives, or, perchance, fall upon the finished play.

In Piccadilly he paused to consider. Where to dine was a question. Formerly doubt would have ended in the club, but he was not making use of the club just now. He was anxious to avoid his acquaintances, so the more obvious restaurants did not commend themselves to him either. He went into a small one in Regent Street, and ensconced himself in a corner out of the way of observation. It was not a very excellent dinner, and it was a very exorbitant price, but neither fact troubled him. In the warmth, and the light, and the bustle, he slipped back into his reverie of the afternoon, and when he paid his bill was as hazy as to what he had eaten as he was to the amount of change the waiter handed him.

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It had rained during dinner, enough to liquefy the mud without cleansing the road. It was unpleasant under foot, but the reflected street lamps lent a picturesqueness to the crescent, and gave it a Venetian look. Cabs crawling through the foggy atmosphere might be distorted gondolas, and the shops, dim with lowered lights, palaces touching the canal.

"Cab, sir?"

He shook his head. He was in the humor to be rather uncomfortable. Nearly every woman he met half stopped as he passed; some spoke to him. He went on, but these women unconsciously molded his thoughts. It was just such another night years ago that a half-stopping woman had appealed to him, and had entered into his life. The young face looking into his had stirred his pity, and pity, turned to passion, had driven him upon the rocks of conscience and wrecked him. Perhaps even the bold faces of the women who spoke to him now had once long ago stirred pity in a man—or passion only. Bold faces painted to resemble youth must have been young once, and innocent. An endless stream of women parading up and down was the sum-total of pity and passion, that pity which can turn to passion, and he hurried away from the scene.

"Thank God!" he said to himself, "the face I pitied is not there. Better to be as I am, a thousand times, than that!"

The reflection gave him comfort, perhaps a little contentment with himself too. He was only human, and there was a certain satisfaction in having paid for his sin, and in being on speaking terms with his conscience. He felt that it was quite possible he might thoroughly enjoy "The Girl of Bagdad."

The flaring lights of the Forum music hall threw a bright patch of light upon the darkness. The performance had begun, and the crowd which had assembled, eager for good places, had been swallowed up in the brilliant interior. Cabs still drew up in pretty

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rapid succession, and the élite of the audience tripped in in silken skirts and evening dress. The Forum was fashionable, and the "show" exceptionally good just now. A strong programme was largely advertised in all the papers. Half a dozen artistes were conspicuous in large type in the advertisements, and their names, in letters a foot long, were posted in front of the house. "Last weeks of Miss Olive Vaughan" was evidently a special announcement. The name was a new one to the man on his way to "The Girl of Bagdad." He knew most of the names of the well-known music-hall celebrities, and he felt a passing interest in Olive Vaughan, whose name he did not know. The interest in the artiste was, however, transferred to an individual who stood gazing at her poster, a queer, crooked figure with a large head, and long arms, and twisted legs. At the first glance he seemed a boy, but closer inspection revealed the fact that he was a man, a caricature. He glanced in at the open doors, where there were palms and flowers and brightly dressed women waiting to be taken to their seats. So before Olive Vaughan's poster these two met. It was the rising of the curtain.

"Beg pardin, yer honor, but could yer help me to get in?"

"I am afraid not," was the answer.

"It's not ordinary cadging that I am, guv'nor. I've looked into the face of a lot o' gents to-night, and ain't had the cheek to ask one on 'em. I've been here more than an hour, an' I've been moved on 'alf a dozen times. It ain't ordinary cadging, I give yer my word."

The man was interested enough to stop.

"I've got a tanner, guv'nor, but I wants another, and if you've got any work I can do, I'll come an' work it off to-morrow. They call me Zett, an' nobody ever know'd me tell a lie."

"And why do you want to get into the Forum? It is as well to earn your money before spending it on pleasure."

"It ain't for pleasure; it's business."

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"What business?"

"There was a girl I knew as run away from home a long while back. Her father was a devil, an' he drove her to it. I'm lookin' for her."

"But why in the Forum?"

"I started in another place, guv'nor, yonder," and he pointed toward Piccadilly Circus. "I've walked about there night after night, lookin' into the face of every woman I met, until they all knew me, and the police too. You see I ain't like other men; I'm easily remembered."

"And you did not find her?"

"No. She was clever, and there was a cove as said she'd make a fortune on the stage; so I've been lookin' for her in the halls. It's takin' me a long time to get through 'em, 'cos I 'ave to live. It takes me two or three weeks to save up a shillin'."

"And you believe she's in the Forum?"

"I don't know, guv'nor; but I somehow feels as if I must get in there to-night."

"Yours is a fruitless quest, my friend, I expect, but there is half a crown."

"I ain't got no change, but I'll get it."

"Stop, I don't want the change; you'll want another shilling for another night."

"Thank yer," said Zett. "Shall I come and work it out? I ain't a cadger."

The man smiled.

"I don't want you to do that, but I should like to know if you succeed. Come and tell me if you do. That's my name and address."

Zett took the card, looked at it, and then at the giver.

"This ain't no good to me; I can't read."

"I thought you were looking at that placard?" pointing to the announcement concerning Miss Olive Vaughan.

"So I was, but I warn't readin' it. What does it say?"

"'Last weeks of Miss Olive Vaughan.'"

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"Ah! that's the kind of name she said she might call herself; something that sounds well."

"You let me know if you succeed. My name is Densham—Victor Densham, and I live at 90B Jermyan Street. Do you think you will remember?"

"Yes. I never forgets anythink. My name's Zett. I suppose I ought to 'ave another name, but I ain't. It's been forgotten, or there never was one, and I lives at Ford's Buildings, Block 3, Church Street, off the Waterloo Road. Thank you, guv'nor."

He turned to go.

"Have you ever thought that, perhaps, if you do find her she may not be glad?" said Densham.

"Often, but it ain't goin' to stop me. She used to be fond o' me, an' I'm trusting to that when she sees me."

Densham watched him enter the building and then turned away toward "The Girl of Bagdad." He did not go far. Time had slipped by; the piece would have begun, and very likely he would not be able to get a seat; besides, Zett had interested him in the Forum, and in Olive Vaughan, whose appearances were so soon to come to an end.

"I'll go to the Forum, and reserve 'The Girl from Bagdad' for another night," he said, as he retraced his steps.

The Forum had a reputation on both sides of the footlights. On the one side its ballets were famous, and its artistes careful not to offend; on the other side gathered nightly the very aristocracy of the demi-monde. There were, of course, some who went to see the performance, but they were not the majority. For the most part the male portion of the audience went to see the show in the auditorium, and the female portion went to be looked at as regularly as though the management paid them for it. Their comfort was well cared for. The foyer and the promenade were luxurious, and gorgeous footmen took the place of common waiters. The display of dress and jewels—not all paste, by any means—was almost dazzling,

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and beauty was not absent, although it was not so apparent. Even the *débutante* grows jaded looking at the end of the season, and the women of the Forum had mostly seen many seasons. Art had long since stepped in to assist more delicate nature, and faces fair enough in the subdued artificial light would not stand the scrutiny of the day. There had been, at various times, individuals and societies for the propagation of the moral welfare of the land who had objected to the Forum; had called it hard names—an open sore, a cancer in our community. And they had appealed to the powers that be to suppress it, to stamp it out as a plague. It had outlived the opposition, was thriving more than ever, so that the powers that be must either have favored the Forum, or feared to meddle with so national an institution. The wisdom of the wise is sometimes near to folly, but the powers that be, thinking possibly of Piccadilly by night, were well advised, perhaps, to leave the temple of the demi-monde alone. So the Forum flourished exceedingly.

Densham went direct to his stall, and wondered whether Zett had managed to get a good view from the gallery. He opened his programme, and a leaflet dropped on to his knees. On it were printed the words of a song, with an intimation that Miss Olive Vaughan would sing it to-night. It was called "East and West," and was a ditty designed to show how differently they managed certain things in these two quarters of the town. The song was written and composed by Gilbert Tennant. Densham did not at first recognize that he was the same man who was responsible for the lyrics in the "Girl from Bagdad." He read the verses, and did not think very much of them. Then he looked at the programme, and found that "Miss Olive Vaughan, Comedienne," was timed to appear at ten o'clock. He lit a cigar and prepared to wait for her. It never occurred to him to ask himself why he was more interested in her turn than in any other.

He was not the only person interested in her either.

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Two young fellows just in front of him were talking about her. One of them was evidently acting as guide and mentor to his less well-informed companion.

"Never seen Vaughan! Why, she's the thing to see in London."

"Good, is she?"

"Rather. Never been anyone like her on the music-hall stage in my time." He was perhaps twenty. "Such a face and figure, my boy. I'd give a lot of money to know her. Pearson—you know Pearson—he promised to get me an introduction, but his father's dying canceled all his engagements."

"Pearson seems to know everybody."

"I expect he gasses a bit; but I think this was all right. He happened to mention something about her that I knew to be a fact," and he whispered the information into his friend's ear.

Densham smiled, and wondered if there could ever have been a time when he was a young ass of this sort.

"By Jove! Is that a fact?"

"Gospel. He found her dancing to a piano-organ and picked her up. Big lift to prime favorite at the Forum, eh?"

"Jolly romantic. Perhaps he'll marry her."

"Perhaps he won't," laughed the other. "I say, she doesn't come on until ten; let's go and have a drink, and see how they are getting on upstairs."

Densham nearly fell asleep over the ballet, but he roused up when the two young men came back, which was just before "Olive Vaughan's" number was exhibited.

The appearance of her number was the signal for a round of applause. The curtain rolled up slowly, and as the orchestra played the opening bars of a song for the second time, a girl walked slowly to the center of the stage, and the buzz of conversation in the house was suddenly stilled.

She sang three songs, the last one being Gilbert Tennant's, and she played upon her audience in a

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marvelous fashion. It was as refined an entertainment as any Densham remembered to have witnessed. She sparkled with comedy, compelling ripples of honest laughter, and then like a magician stayed the laughter with a touch of pathos which nearly moved to tears. In all she said, in every movement and gesture, she gave the impression that she was only at the beginning of what she could do; that however long you might listen to her, you could never possibly grow weary; that if she sang the same song over again it would be different, improved; and that she appealed differently to each individual member of the audience.

Then the curtain came down.

"By Jove! she is good."

"My boy, your education has advanced a step tonight. Won't she be *AI* in comic opera! She's chucking the Halls, you know, for the legitimate."

Densham paid little attention to these remarks. He was reading the words of Tennant's song through again. He had thought little of them, but the singer had given them a new meaning, and he changed his opinion. As he read, a vision of the singer rose before him. It mattered not that a troop of acrobats were now on the stage; he saw only Olive Vaughan—a girl dressed in black—silk he thought it was; skirts falling half-way between her knees and ankles, something red on one shoulder and in her hair, flowers perhaps, and a face—and those youngsters in front had suggested that she was not a good woman. They had gone, or Densham would have felt compelled to speak to them about it.

"Densham, by all that's wonderful!"

A hand was laid upon his shoulder from behind.

"Farquharson. Have you been sitting there all the evening?"

"No. I paid for a seat, and then found some friends of mine in that box yonder. I spotted you from there—thought I couldn't be mistaken. How are you? I had an idea you were still abroad."

"My movements are uncertain. I am only in town

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for a day or two, and haven't thought it worth while to make my presence known."

"Traveling incognito, eh?"

"With no ulterior motives, though. What an exceedingly clever woman that Olive Vaughan is! I've never seen her before."

"Clever! I should think so. She took the town by storm some time ago, and has held it ever since. She is leaving the music halls almost directly."

"So I heard somebody say."

"There is no saying what she may accomplish, and she is a most charming woman off the stage."

"You know her?"

"Well, I was going to say intimately, but that would not be true. You get to know her up to a certain point, and then you draw blank. Beyond that point, nobody seems to be admitted into her confidences."

"Who is she?"

"She has come from nothing, I fancy. She is one of Overton's protégées, you know. He got her a hearing, and a man called Tennant writes most of her songs. He is a perfect genius at fitting her exactly."

"Overton, eh?"

"You don't think his introduction into the ménage increases the lady's attraction," laughed Farquharson. "Well perhaps I am with you there. But he is a factor, and one has to put up with him. From her point of view the question of gratitude comes in. By the way, would you like to know her?"

"I should."

"Then I can gratify your wish. This is Miss Vaughan's last week here, and there is a kind of managerial supper party to-night at the Cecil. I have a card for myself and a friend. Will you come?"

"I shall be delighted."

"Meet me at the entrance, then, after the performance."

Left alone, Densham experienced a sense of

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pleasurable anticipation at the prospect of knowing Olive Vaughan. She had impressed him as no other woman had done, and the fact would probably have annoyed him but that other men seemed equally sensitive to her attractions. What was it which seemed to draw him irresistibly toward her? Not her beauty—he had hardly considered that—was not even sure that she was beautiful. It must be her personality, her atmosphere, and yet he had never seen her half an hour ago, and now had only seen her for a few moments, and heard her sing three commonplace songs. They were commonplace, he argued; it was she who gave them character and value.

“I must know her, hear her voice again, and see what she is really, really without the footlights, the music, and the applause—and yet——”

His thoughts took a different shape. Out of the chaos of the past they were formed, but they took a form ugly enough yet real.

He went to the entrance and found Farquharson there before him.

“Come along. I thought you had changed your mind.”

“It is terribly ungracious of me, but so I have. On second thoughts, I think I would rather not come. I hope I am putting you to no inconvenience?”

“Only disappointing me. You are establishing a record, Densham. I should not know where to put my hand on another man who would refuse an introduction to Olive Vaughan.”

“Circumstances stand in the way.”

“Any other man wouldn’t let them,” laughed Farquharson.

The men shook hands, and Densham turned in the direction of Jermyn Street.

“I had not expected to fight so hard a battle tonight. That woman is good at heart, even if there is evil on the surface. My sudden admiration would be an insult. My road lies in an opposite direction to hers.”

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Farquharson went toward the stage door to find some one to drive down to the Cecil with him. A small crowd of loiterers were standing there watching the performers in the last ballet coming out. Just in front of him, close to the door, was a queer twisted figure, a man who closely scanned the face of each comer.

Two men came out, a lady between them.

"The brougham holds three, Overton. I claim the third seat, Miss Vaughan. As one of the givers of the feast, I ask a privilege."

"Of course you must come," she answered.

The twisted figure darted forward.

"Clara!"

She paused with her foot on the step.

"Stand back!" said Overton sharply. "Get in, Miss Vaughan."

"Clara, don't you know me—Zett?"

She turned to her companions.

"One moment," she said; and moving away from them a little, she put her hand on Zett's shoulder.

"Why are you here, Zett?"

"Lookin' for you. I've been lookin' for you ever since you ran away."

"Hush! not so loud."

"I ain't ashamed of it," answered Zett. "Are you?"

"No, no, of course not; but——"

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I couldn't. I had made a promise. Now it doesn't matter. Listen, Zett. Miss Vaughan, 16 Harmony Road, S.W. Can you remember that?"

"Yes."

"Come there to-morrow afternoon and see me. I can't wait now."

"No hank?"

"You silly fellow. That is where I live. Come to-morrow."

"Now, Miss Vaughan," said the manager.

She slipped quickly into the carriage, the door

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was slammed to, and Zett watched it drive rapidly away.

“What did that fellow want?” asked Overton.

“A private matter, Mr. Overton.” And then she abruptly entered into conversation with her other companion.

CHAPTER VIII

A RUINED LIFE

VICTOR DENSHAM was not a hero. He was an ordinary man set in the midst of ordinary temptations, and he had fallen in an ordinary, commonplace manner. To do him justice, he never attempted to justify himself by believing that he was out of the common ruck, and therefore not morally bound by conventional laws. It is astonishing how many men do allow themselves this quaint conceit, and while they quite understood the meanness of others' sins, dignify their own with a halo of romance. If Victor Densham felt himself in any way superior to his fellows, it was in the fact that he had made an attempt to right the wrong, whereas most other men, having confessed their sins—to themselves, of course—quietly turned their backs upon them, and began life afresh as respectable citizens. Perhaps he thought himself rather more honest than they were. The loose point in his argument was in starting from the premiss that practically all men had sinned in like manner as he had done. Men live with this fallacy, believing that, because their friends and acquaintances are mostly like themselves, there are no others. There are, and as we grow older we begin to find them out.

As Densham walked home, he was weak enough to experience some regret that he had not accepted Farquharson's invitation. There came to him the insidious suggestion that it was mere childishness to cut himself off from all pleasures, perfectly harmless pleasures. There could be no harm, surely, in knowing Olive Vaughan; and if in her society he succeeded

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in forgetting his troubles for a while, so much the better. But the woman?

"That's where my infernal conceit comes in," he said rather savagely, as he put his latchkey in the door. "I am presupposing that because the girl interests me I must necessarily interest her. What folly! I wish I had gone to the supper."

He was surprised to find the light turned on in his sitting room. Parker was waiting for him.

"You here? What is the matter?" he asked.

"I am sorry to say, sir, that the mistress has managed to elude us."

Densham threw his gloves on the table with an impatient gesture.

"Really, Parker, this is most serious, most annoying. On the last occasion——"

"Begging your pardon, sir, this time it was altogether different. The cunning displayed was of a very exceptional character. I am bound to say that I have never seen the mistress so much herself since—since I first joined you in Italy, sir."

"Never mind that; tell me the circumstances."

"Since you left on Monday, sir, the mistress has been quite herself. On Wednesday night, perhaps, she was a little—a little excited; went as far as to speak of Mrs. Elliott as her keeper; but yesterday she was quite right; said that she was expecting you home, and had a mind to walk down to the village to meet you."

"That was enough to put you on your guard," said Densham.

"It was. We didn't lose sight of her all day. Early in the evening she said that, as you were evidently not coming until the next day, she would go to bed. Mrs. Elliott looked into her room at ten o'clock, and she was then sleeping quite quietly. Next morning she had gone; and although I have made careful inquiries in the village, I have found no trace of her."

"She caught the early train to town, I expect."

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"There were no passengers from our station by the early train. I made it my business to find out, sir."

Densham stroked his face with his hand thoughtfully.

"On the last occasion you were able to find her at once, sir, so I thought I had better lose no time in coming to you."

"Quite right, Parker," and Densham looked at his watch. "Half past twelve. It is too late to do anything to-night. I cannot knock people up at this hour."

"No, sir; it wouldn't be natural."

Parker placed the spirit tantalus and a soda siphon on the table.

"You are having an experience you didn't bargain for when you entered my service, Parker."

"Yes, sir. It's an experience, sir, and experience is always useful."

"I am grateful to you. Your mistress's disease—it amounts to that—is a great trouble to me."

"Yes, sir. Is it incurable?"

"I am afraid so."

"In the family, perhaps, sir. I have heard of such cases."

"It may have been. I did not inquire. Choosing a wife is not like choosing a horse."

"No, sir; and perhaps it's a pity that it isn't. It might be better if marriage were considered more from a business standpoint than it is. I have been considering it that way myself, sir, if you have no objection."

"You, Parker! Then you are leaving me?"

"No, sir; that is not my intention. Mrs. Elliott has been a long time in your service as housekeeper, and has been a respectable widow some years; we are thinking, if it is agreeable to you, sir, of joining the two services. You might be able to spare us for a few days' holiday presently, and afterwards things could go on just as usual."

"I see no objection, Parker."

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"You know nothing against Mrs. Elliott?"

"On the contrary, all I know is very much in her favor."

"Then, sir, I think you may take the matter as finally settled," said Parker, taking up his master's overcoat and hat.

"I have not looked upon you as a marrying man," said Densham.

"No, sir; appearances are deceptive. I was very surprised myself, sir, when you married. Nothing more you require, sir?"

"No, Parker."

The servant left the room, closing the door softly behind him. He was a rare treasure, a good and faithful servant; but he probably understood his master a good deal better than Densham thought he did. He could not help but wonder at the woman his master had brought to Felstead as its mistress, at least in name. In reality she was nothing of the kind.

There had come a night in Italy, less than twelve months after their marriage, when Victor Densham had found his wife drunk—drunk to helplessness. There had been occasions before when he had thought her rather silly, foolishly sentimental, or unreasonably bad-tempered, but it had never occurred to him to attribute her conduct to the right cause. It was not that he shut his eyes to a fact, was unwilling to recognize it; the truth never entered his head. That night the terrible reality of his life burst upon him. The awful knowledge that he was tied to a drunken wife seemed to paralyze him for a time; his brain refused to work, to look at facts clearly, to think out a solution, a remedy. In the first hour of his trial he walked out into the night, away from the truth for miles. The temptation came to him not to turn back, to leave it all behind him, but with dawn he turned again. He would talk to her, reason with her. She was fond enough of him to listen to him, and to care about what he said. Perhaps, after all, he was not altogether blameless. He was not conscious of having neglected

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her in any way, but then women so often view such matters so differently to men. The result of his interview with his wife gave him courage.

"I am very sorry, Victor," she said. "I did not know the effect it was having upon me."

"Don't do it again, Kitty. You are such a dear girl: it would be a pity to spoil yourself that way."

She may have been really penitent, her husband thought so; or it may have been that a look in Victor's face frightened her. She had won so much, it would be folly to lose it for such a small thing. Parker did not believe in the penitence. He had been wiser than his master, and had attributed her behavior on previous occasions to the right cause. Penitent or not, it was not long before Victor found her drunk again. He did all in his power to stop her downfall. He left her as little as possible; took her hither and thither to divert her mind, to give her a more healthy appreciation of life. But slowly, day by day, his heart sank within him. He had looked the future squarely in the face, he had expected disappointments in it and trials, but this he had never anticipated.

The full knowledge of the life he was bound to come suddenly. Once again he reasoned with his wife. This time she was not penitent. Perhaps the effects of the drink had not evaporated, or Victor's words may have sounded harsh.

"Well, if I was drunk last night, what of it?"

"It's a disgrace, Kate—a terrible disgrace."

"To me or to you, do you mean?"

"To both of us."

"You needn't trouble about me. I don't feel it."

"And I don't count, I suppose?" Victor answered, somewhat hardly.

"Not much. Bah! Why be sentimental about it. I am no worse because I happen to take too much sometimes. Anybody I care about is not likely to cut me for it. Even you wouldn't cut a man who happened to get drunk at the club one night, I suppose;

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and I dare say you've seen two doors into the street instead of one before now." She laughed at her own pleasantry.

"I am not in the habit of drinking too much," he said quietly, covering his face with his hands.

"One of your few virtues, Victor. I suppose you thought it was a virtue to marry me, and now you've lived to be disappointed."

"I have not said so."

"Your face has been telling me so for ever so long. Before we were married life was worth living; there was excitement in it—love, real love—not a husband's make believe. You don't call roaming about this beastly country from one dirty, decayed city to another excitement, do you? because I don't. I'm sick to death of it."

"I thought you would like it."

"Oh, no, you didn't. You thought you would keep me out of the way of your friends, that was the reason."

"For heaven's sake, Kate, let us look at the matter reasonably. In what way have I failed as a husband?"

"Oh, I suppose you're all right as a husband. I expect I was never meant to be any man's wife. I was a fool to accept you, only I couldn't resist the temptation. It would have been better if I had let you settle something upon me to keep me out of the workhouse, and lived my own life my own way to the end."

"Don't, Kate, don't."

"You suggested that we should be reasonable. I am being reasonable. I am just stating bare facts. You know, Victor, you're depressing to be always with."

"You have never led me to suppose you thought so."

"I often used to tell you not to preach. Besides, I did not see you for weeks together in the old days."

"I am sorry it has all turned out such a failure."

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"It hasn't if you look at things sensibly. I have known life—real life. You have helped me to know it. You mustn't ask me now to play the bread-and-butter schoolgirl."

"I have never asked you to do such a thing."

"Well, you make an awful fuss about a little champagne getting into my head. You would have laughed at it if we were still in Bernard Mansions."

Victor looked up suddenly.

"I never saw you the worse for drink there."

It was not his words but the question in his eyes which irritated her.

"No," she answered; "I wasn't such a fool as to let you see me then. The experiment would have been too dangerous."

Bitter words rose to his lips, but he did not speak them. He had helped her to know life. It was her own statement, and it was the truth. His lot was to bear the punishment.

"We must make the best of things," he said quietly, and left her.

She was not always in this mood; sometimes for days together she was her old self, and Victor hoped again. But the longer the interval, the worse the relapse when it came, and often the intervals were short. The drink disease had seized upon Mrs. Denham, and slowly but surely she grew worse. After wandering half over the Continent, Victor took his wife to Felstead. Parker and Mrs. Elliott were taken into his confidence, and there was some truth in Kate's declaration that Mrs. Elliott was her keeper. It was necessary to keep a constant watch upon her; at times she became almost unmanageable, bitterly accusing her husband, and expressing her hatred of him. In spite of the watching, she had left the house on more than one occasion, but she had always returned to take up her life again as though nothing had happened. Once or twice Victor had found her with some friends she had in Brompton, a respectable woman and her daughters, and on each occasion she

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had returned to Felstead quietly with him, only expressing a vague sort of wonder that he should take the trouble to look after her.

Victor Densham's life was not an enviable one. In Felstead he passed for a misanthrope. He was a miser like his old uncle, some of the villagers said; but this was contradicted by others, who had personal knowledge of his open-handedness. Of his neighbors he saw little. Felstead House kept no company; and although some strange stories concerning the master were afloat, no one suspected the real truth. The existence of a Mrs. Densham was practically unknown. The lady had been seen occasionally, but if she gave rise to any speculation, it was rather of a scandalous character than otherwise, and in many houses about Felstead Victor Densham was looked upon as a man it was better not to know. Quite conscious of this, he went little into his old haunts when he occasionally came to town, to his chambers in Jermy Street, for a few days.

It was not often that he came to London. He felt that his duty was to be at Felstead, and right manfully he performed it. In every way possible he played the part of a devoted husband. Every whim of his wife's that it was possible to satisfy he did, yet she told him day after day that she hated him. He had ruined her and spoiled her life altogether. That was her formula; it never varied. He no longer reasoned with her; she was past that. He accepted his life such as it was with a sigh, and bowed his head to his punishment. Strong in his sense of duty, he had refused to meet Olive Vaughan, but he could not forget her. The lilt of her songs sounded in his ears all night, and when he awoke his eyes saw her face and the black silk dress with the red something at the shoulder. No, Victor Densham was not a hero, but he was a strong man, a sinner making an endeavor.

Early next morning he went to Brompton, but nothing had been seen of his wife there, nor had they heard from her for some time. Densham went back

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to Jermyn Street and told Parker that he should return to Felstead by the three o'clock train. Then he turned to his desk, and more to kill time than anything else, wrote two or three unimportant letters.

"There's a person wants to see you, sir," said Parker, entering the room presently.

"What sort of a person?"

"A deformed person, sir; says that you told him to call. In fact, he has your card."

"Oh, yes, I remember; show him up."

The trouble with his wife had driven much of what had happened last night out of his head. He remembered the girl and her lilting songs; he had quite forgotten the cripple who had spoken to him outside the Forum.

Zett entered the room slowly. There was nothing very remarkable in Densham's chambers, there had been no lavish expenditure in furnishing them. They were comfortable, that was all. But Zett had little acquaintance with comfortable rooms, and they were a revelation to him.

"Good mornin'. I——"

"Sit down, won't you?"

Zett looked round undecidedly. There did not seem to be a chair to fit him exactly. After a moment's reflection he chose the smallest and most uncomfortable one, and sat on the extreme edge of it, twisting his legs together as though to make as little of them as possible.

"You told me to come, guv'nor. Is there anything what I can do. I'll do it more willing than any job I've ever done."

"Did you succeed last night?" Densham asked.

"Yes."

"You spoke to her?"

"Yes; I waited for her. There was a carriage ready for her, and two coves wanted to shove me out of the way when she came out, but I wants more shoving than most does to make me move. That's one advantage of havin' twisted little legs like these 'ere of

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mine, they gives you more balance than such legs as yours does."

"And was she pleased to see you?"

"Well, I can't go as fur as to say she was pleased; but then Clara was never one of them what laughs and cries at nothing. Anyway, she wasn't real angry, as I thought she might be. She told me where she lived, and said I might go and see her."

"Then she's not all bad," said Densham. He spoke in a low tone, answering his own thoughts. This ballet girl, or whatever she was, from the Forum with her carriage was one woman, but the girl who had still heart enough to remember her old crippled companion was another being.

"I didn't quite catch," said Zett.

"I was thinking that she was not all bad."

"She ain't bad at all. She's as good as any woman there is—in herself," he added, as an afterthought. "If there's any bad in her, it's what her beast of a father and other beasts I don't know have put there. She's a very beautiful woman, guv'nor, and she ain't nobody in particular; and when one o' this sort gets thrown on her own, she's got to be careful. Perhaps you knows what I mean."

"I know."

"You see, it's so easy for some o' these swells to make things seem a sight more pleasant than they really are; and if a woman's down on her luck an' got no home, an' no money, well, it's mortal hard to keep from going over the bridge an' stopping there."

"Drowning themselves!"

"Some of 'em does, but I wasn't meaning that. Over the bridge was the way Clara and me talked about it—Waterloo Bridge. You see, when you gets this side there's a lot of bustle an' lights an' money. Folks on the lookout for that kind o' thing don't come over our side."

"You will go to see her?" asked Densham.

"I'm going now. It's a goodish walk, but I can't tell you where it is, 'cos it's a secret. Clara said so."

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"I am afraid that you will find you have lost your old companion."

"Very like; but she ain't lost me, and she never will," answered Zett. "She may be all right, I ain't sure yet. If she is, I ain't going to stand around and spoil her chance of becoming a great singer. But if she ain't, well, sure enough there'll come a time when she'll want a real friend. I'll be there then; see, guv'nor?"

"A singer, is she?"

"Yes; she sings and kind of acts about, not a real play, but bits like, and folks clap their hands at her, so I expects they like it. I don't set much store on that kind o' thing myself. I've been to a play sometimes when I've had a bit o' luck and can get some chap to sell my papers for me for a hour or two. They has some real plays down at the Surrey Theayter. What I likes is when the bad 'un's got to have his turn, and they runs over him with a steam roller, or busts him in pieces in a coal mine. That's worth a tanner, I can tell you."

Densham smiled at this enthusiastic critic.

"Clara just sings something, just moves about a bit and goes away. I dare say it's very well done, but it's because she's beautiful people clap for her to come on again. Last night she wore a black dress with something red here, and——"

"What did you say her name was?"

"Clara—Clara Farrow. You don't know her, do you?"

"No."

"She calls herself something else now."

"Olive Vaughan, is it?"

"That's it, guv'nor. Do you know her by that name?"

"No. I saw—I have heard her sing."

"Did you think as much of it as the Surrey Theayter?"

"I have never been to the Surrey."

"Never been! You've missed something."

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"Very likely. I have missed many things in my life."

"Have you? I'm sorry."

"I suppose you think a man like I am ought to be happy."

"Well, I dare say you has troubles same as I has, but you've got more chances than what I have. If a man goes straight he ought to be happy. I ain't unhappy except about Clara."

"You may be right, Zett. Perhaps I have not gone straight."

"I ain't a-goin' to believe that, guv'nor. I spotted you as a real gentleman last night. Now if that job's ready for me, I'll get about it."

Zett slipped from his chair and shuffled to the table, on the corner of which he carefully placed a two-shilling piece.

"What's that for?"

"That's the change what I couldn't give you last night. I shan't want to be going about lookin' for her now. I'm here to work out the sixpence I owe."

Densham smiled, but almost there were tears in his eyes.

"Keep the money, Zett, and I haven't got a job for you just now. When I have, I'll remember that there is half a crown between us."

"I'd sooner have worked for it," said Zett.

"Perhaps you have without knowing it," answered Densham. "I knew a woman once who was in danger. I tried to help her."

"Did you succeed?" asked Zett eagerly.

"No, I failed. You will have better luck. I can tell you one thing. I have heard men talk of Olive Vaughan, and I believe she is a good woman—really a good woman."

"I know she ain't really bad."

"You remember my name, Zett?"

"Mr. Densham."

"If you ever want help for your companion or for yourself, come to me. I've missed the chance of do-

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ing a lot of good things in my life—I should like more chances in the future. If you're in trouble, come to me. I promise you shall find a friend, whether you come to-morrow or ten years hence."

"You mightn't be alive, guv'nor."

"If I am alive," Densham added, and held out his hand.

Zett looked at his own, then rubbing it slowly down his coat, he put it into Densham's. His grip almost made Densham wince. The cripple's fingers were like steel.

"I'll come if I'm in trouble. Thank you, guv'nor."

Zett shuffled from the room, and Densham stood looking at the closed door.

"A strange acquaintance for me to make; yet somehow it seems natural that he should come into my life. Olive Vaughan and Zett, a music-hall singer and a crippled paper seller! I wonder what Zett would have thought of me if I had told him about Kate. I don't believe he would have taken my two shillings; I feel convinced he wouldn't have taken my hand."

It was a strange idea to come into Victor Densham's mind—a strange thing that he should pause to think, or to care, what a beggarly cripple thought of him.

CHAPTER IX

A LIFE OF POSSIBILITIES

THE fashioning of Olive Vaughan, chief attraction at the Forum, from Clara Farrow, the favorite at the factory-girls' club in the Waterloo Road, had not been a particularly difficult process. Nature had given her a voice and a marked personality, and Gilbert Tennant had contrived to write for her songs which fitted her exactly. But the making of Olive Vaughan the woman from Clara Farrow the raw material was a more complex matter, even if the result appeared to have been achieved as easily. The former did not surprise Tennant at all; the latter did.

Directly she became the inmate of the house in Harmony Road—the house with the lamp, it was familiarly called by the neighbors—Edward Overton had stood aside, and given Tennant a free hand. Tennant chose her masters, suggested her course of study, and delicately gave her hints in various ways himself. The masters were well chosen—men who could appreciate originality, and understand the danger of hampering it with too much study, too many hard rules. Tennant's aim was to make a great actress of her; but while setting her toward this goal, he paid the chief attention to her general education. She was to be something more than a great actress—she was to be a great woman. The pupil applied herself enthusiastically to the task. To great natural ability there was added a firm determination to succeed. Once set toward her goal, she scorned all thought of failure; and the greater the difficulties which rose before her, the firmer her determination to surmount them. If at times there came a disbelief in her own powers, there

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was Gilbert Tennant at hand to laugh at it. He thoroughly believed in her, and the knowledge was an ever fresh incentive to her to persevere. So Olive Vaughan, comedienne, came to the Halls and conquered. She was altogether unlike the ordinary run of entertainers, and a public with a jaded palate welcomed her and applauded her to the echo. So far her triumph was complete. The development of the woman was another matter. It surprised Tennant; it rather annoyed Overton.

The house with the lamp had from the first been a mystery to the inhabitants of Harmony Road. It was evident that a large amount of money had been spent upon it, and the neighbors did not understand why anyone who could afford to spend so much should choose such a locality. In due course a middle-aged lady took up her abode there—not at all the sort of person likely to possess a house of that kind; and then quite suddenly a young and pretty woman was found to live there. In course of time it was discovered that the house belonged to a Mrs. Lambert, but whether Mrs. Lambert were the elderly lady, or the young one, was not known, and whether there were a Mr. Lambert was a mystery. It was further found that certain men came there on different days of the week and at stated times, and as the sound of a rich young voice was heard singing very often, it was concluded that at least one of these constant visitors was a music master, and therefore that the other visitors were probably masters of one sort or another, too. Then Mr. Tennant visited there, and sometimes another gentleman unknown to Harmony Road. Mr. Tennant was known. His neighbors spoke of him under the extremely comprehensive term, journalist, and knew nothing more about him whatever. The Tennants had caused annoyance by keeping aloof from their neighbors, and it was very soon evident that Mrs. Lambert intended to do the same. One woman, however, whose observance did her infinite credit, in that it proved how persistently she must have watched

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from behind her blinds, declared in the fullness of time that although Mr. Tennant went there constantly, Mrs. Tennant never went at all. Here was a mystery indeed, and some gentle-minded and generous souls spoke feelingly of "poor Mrs. Tennant," and gave it as their opinion "that Mrs. Lambert"—meaning the young woman—"was no better than she ought to be."

People's opinion troubled Olive Vaughan—for so she had begun to call and sign herself—not at all. She did not hear the opinions spoken, and she was far too busy to speculate upon what people thought of her. She had weighed that consideration before taking any steps at all, and having done so, put it behind her as of small importance. It was true that Mrs. Tennant had taken no notice of her, but this did not appear strange to her. Mr. Tennant was helping her, but it was not to be expected that he was going to ask his wife to become her friend. Mr. Tennant's position was so different from hers. As a fact, Mrs. Tennant's refusal to extend a welcome to her husband's protégée was the cause of some annoyance to Gilbert. It occasioned the shadow of a real quarrel in the Tennant household.

"I thought you were more generous, Mary," he said on one occasion.

"It is not a question of generosity," was his wife's answer. "You know absolutely nothing about her beyond the fact that she has a voice."

"My dear, do you suppose I should ask you to have anything to do with her, should I have anything to do with her myself, if she were not a good woman?"

"You are too fond of vouching for people's goodness and honesty without any solid foundation to go upon."

"Can you name one instance?"

Mrs. Tennant laughed; the question was too absurd.

"A dozen, Gilbert. Jane Stevens will do for an example. She could cook, and you thought she had a nice face, so you would have her without a character."

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"Oh, she was only a servant." Jane Stevens was a sore point with Gilbert. She had stayed a week, and then gone away one evening, taking, among other things, his gold watch, since which time he had been compelled to wear the old silver one with which he had started school life.

"And your protégée yonder, what is she?" asked Mrs. Tennant.

"A lady intuitively."

"And a factory girl in reality."

Gilbert did not think it worth while to point out that this was not exactly a fact.

"No, Gilbert; for the present, at any rate, I do not wish to know her. She may be all you believe her, but she may not. If she is in trouble you may count upon me to do what I can for her, but for the children's sake I will not introduce into our midst a woman about whom I know nothing, and who, to say the very least of it, is not in our own position."

Gilbert said no more, but he either would not, or could not, see the matter from his wife's point of view. To Olive Vaughan he said nothing about his wife, and it never occurred to her that there was any reason why he should. She had spoken to the children once or twice because she had met them in the road with Gilbert, and on the first occasion Mavis had declared on her return home that "she was the beautifullest lady in all the world except mother"—a compliment surely both to Miss Vaughan and Mrs. Tennant.

Through this time of her probation Olive had felt no need of a woman's friendship. She had never known what it was to have a mother's care or a sister's affection, and she was too occupied now to feel any real want. Besides, she had Mrs. Lambert, who hovered midway between a companion and a servant, and always addressed her as "My dear." This was more than she had ever experienced in the past. Her success, however, especially at the Forum, had given birth to the want within her. She was brought sud-

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denly into the society of men and women whose lives were entirely different from anything she had known. From many of the women she shrank instinctively. They had too close a resemblance to the women she and Zett had talked about. Yet she had to be civil to them. From the men, many of them, she shrank, too, but in a different way. She was conscious of their admiration, and their flattery was at first pleasant, since her success was so new; but when she understood that their admiration was for her, her person, her beauty, the thought sickened her. A man's true admiration she had never known; this kind of spurious imitation only recalled the odious insinuations her father had been wont to make. At night sometimes when undressing, and when she caught the reflection of herself in her mirror, she almost regretted the career she had entered upon. It was the very door to fame her father might have chosen for her—it was the road along which so many had traveled to a moral and physical destruction; and into her heart there came the longing for a real friendship, a woman's real love, some one to whom she could talk freely and openly, and tell of all that was in her soul. She had Gilbert Tennant, and she spoke to him more freely than she did to anyone; but after all he was a man, although at times she almost forgot the fact, and she caught herself looking longingly at his wife when she passed. By her face she knew her for a good woman. Why could they not be friends?

It is difficult for a man to go through life without love; for a woman it is almost impossible. Born in her is the mother instinct, which, if its natural outlet is closed, will sooner or later overflow into another channel, and enfold some one or something with a love that has the touch of divinity in it. Circumstances had combined to crush this instinct in Olive Vaughan. Her childhood had known no love, and she had grown to womanhood hand in hand almost with all that was coarsest and most bestial in life. Sickly flattery had set her beauty as a snare for her undoing. The gift

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of beauty, so powerful a weapon to use for good, was nothing; she only heard that it had its market value—its equivalent in pounds, shillings, and pence. That she had come forth clean from such surroundings was proof of strength of character, but of course they had had a detrimental effect upon her. They had made her self-reliant and self-willed—useful armor against her enemies; but they had also done much to kill the love, the sympathy, and the tenderness of the woman in her. Now in her new environment the woman began to struggle for existence again; even as a new spring floods a landscape with a faint green blush, so her nature put forth a promise.

Zett could hardly have come to Harmony Road at a better time. The moment Olive saw him at the gate, all the best in her sprang into life. Here was some one she could pity, could help and care for—some one who had touched more of her life than anyone else in the world.

She hurried to the door to meet him.

“Zett!”

“I’ve come, you see,” he answered, in his matter-of-fact way. “You said I might.”

“Come in, Zett. This is better than the Waterloo Road, isn’t it?” She waved her hand round the room, a welcome and an introduction to it in one.

Zett looked down at his shabby garments and then at Olive in a bewitching frock which even his untutored eyes could see cost money.

“It’s pretty dear all this, ain’t it?” he asked.

“Times are changed, Zett. Money comes more easily now than it used to do. I have stepped into a new life altogether.”

“And you like it, Clara?”

“Yes; but my name is not Clara now. I am called Olive—Olive Vaughan. It is a pretty name, isn’t it?”

“Well enough if it was your own, but it ain’t.”

“You foolish fellow, it is my name now because everybody knows me by it. I can assure you Olive Vaughan is a person of some distinction.”

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"I know that. I heard people clap you last night."

"And what did you think of me, Zett?—truly, mind. So many people flatter me, I should like to hear the real truth for once."

"Well, Clara—Olive, I mean; I'll get used to the name in time—I thought you looked lovely, though I don't know as how you looked better than you do now; but as for what you did, I didn't think nothing much o' that. Then you mustn't take what I say to heart, you know, 'cos I likes real acting, and you ain't a real actress, are you?"

"Perhaps not, Zett, although some people say I am."

"Ah, they don't know: very like they've never been to the Surrey Theayter."

"It doesn't matter, Zett, at any rate. They pay me for what I do, and that is the great point. How came you to be at the Forum last night?"

"Luck. I've been lookin' for you ever since you left home. I ain't blaming you, because it warn't much of a home, I know, but I was anxious. I've been in most o' the Halls in London lookin' for you, and it's taken me a long time to get round 'em."

"Why were you anxious, Zett?"

He looked at her and round the room slowly.

"You know," he said.

She shook her head.

"I ain't going to put it in words exactly. I was able to talk straight to you once, but somehow I can't now. You ain't the girl I used to know."

"Am I not a better girl than the one you used to know?" she said, getting up and standing in front of him with her hands behind her.

"Are you?"

"I see, Zett. I know what you mean. Yes, Zett, I am a better girl—happier, more honest, better altogether. I am not perfect, far from it, but one thing I can do. I can look a good mother in the face without a blush, and kiss her child's lips conscious of my

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own innocence. I do not boast, Zett; I thank God that it is so."

"That's said like truth, and I believe it," said Zett. "I'm glad to hear it, 'cos I've been very anxious."

"You don't think I am capable of taking care of myself," said Olive, looking at her strange companion with a queer smile.

"I knows what temptations girls has."

"And men too, Zett."

"I suppose so; although I ain't got much interest in any man. Leastways there is one, Mr. Victor Densham."

"And who is Mr. Victor Densham?"

"A pal o' mine. A tip-top swell, I can tell you, what lives in Jermyn Street."

"You seem to be getting on in the world too, Zett."

"Oh, yes; I usually gets enough to eat, and I ain't slept out for a long while. I picked up this 'ere Mr. Victor Densham only last night, and I went to see him this morning by appointment."

"Oh, I am glad, Zett; he is going to do something good for you?"

"He did last night. I was hanging about outside the Forum, an' I hadn't enough money to get in, when he comes up, an' I tell him how things stand, an' what I wants to get inside for."

"You told him about me?"

"Only in a general way. I says I was lookin' for a girl what had run away, an' he says I was to let him know if I found her; besides, I had some change to give him, so I went and saw him in Jermyn Street."

"And told him who Olive Vaughan was? You had no right to do that."

"I ain't done no harm," answered Zett stoutly. "I didn't tell him where you lived. Besides, he knew all about you; he's seen you act."

"That is an excellent reason for his knowledge," laughed Olive. "Do I carry all my character in my face, I wonder, and tell the world what I am by singing a song?"

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"I don't know how that may be, but he said he was sure you were a good woman. With a face like yours, you couldn't be anything else."

Olive turned to put an ornament straight on the mantelpiece.

"This stranger had more faith in me than you had, Zett."

"I don't deny it. It's easy to have faith in anyone you don't care about, 'cos it doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong. He hasn't talked over things with you like what I have. He was an out-and-out good 'un; said if I was in trouble, or if you was, for that matter, I was to go to him for help."

"Mr. Victor Densham interests me," said Olive. "People are so ready to think evil, it is pleasant to chance on one who is different."

"That's one for me," said Zett.

"We won't talk about it any more. Tell me all about yourself. For me the old life has gone, but I am glad to see a friend out of it. But you must tell no one of me. That is part of the bargain I have with those who have helped me."

"They won't like me coming, eh?"

"You shall be an exception."

Presently Mrs. Lambert brought in tea. The bustle she was always in gave an air of importance to the most trivial thing she did.

"Five minutes late, my dear, I'm afraid, but the kettle was perverse." She had finished speaking before she was well in the room. Then she saw Zett. "Beg your pardon, my dear; I didn't know you had company."

"I shall want another cup, Mrs. Lambert, please, and more bread and butter, and some jam and cake."

The good lady studied Zett from head to foot, but her face did not alter its expression. It was impossible to tell what she thought of the visitor.

"Yes, my dear, certainly," she said, and went out.

"Who's she?" asked Zett.

"My—my housekeeper."

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Zett gave a low whistle.

"You are getting grand, my word."

"I could not very well live alone. I have not been so careless of appearances, you see, Zett."

"I've never set no store on appearances," was the answer. "It's what folks are, not what they appear to be. Judged by my clothes, I ought to be a thorough wrong 'un, but I ain't. Now I've made you angry. You think I don't believe in you."

"Do you?"

"Yes; me and Mr. Victor Densham is of the same way of thinkin'."

"Bother Victor Densham!" laughed Olive. "I don't care what he thinks. I want your opinion."

"Well, I believes in you, but I knows the temptations. I wants to be honest. Fine weather to-day don't make it certain that it won't rain to-morrow. I ain't so anxious as I was, but I can't help seeing that you're the most beautiful woman I've ever set eyes on, an' what I sees, others'll see too. An' if this actin' business goes wrong, and your present friends chucks you over, an' you ain't got any money an' no home—well, I say, if it comes to that, go to Mr. Victor Densham of Jermyn Street, will you? I trust him like I would myself."

"Excellent advice, Zett. I'll come to you, and we'll go to this friend of yours together."

"That's a bargain."

Here Mrs. Lambert bustled in with another cup and further provisions.

"My dear, will you see Mr. Tennant? I told him you had company."

"Certainly; and it means another cup. I am always at home to Mr. Tennant. Come, Zett, here's a tea such as I could not offer you in the old days. Here's a chair for you."

"Hadn't I better go; this 'ere other fellow coming?"

"No. Everybody does as I tell them in this house, without question."

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As he went toward the table, Gilbert Tennant came in.

"I am afraid I am an intruder," he said; "I know I am often a tremendous nuisance."

"You are neither the one nor the other."

"It is nice of you to say so."

"And you are just in time for tea. This, Mr. Tennant, is Zett, a very great friend of mine."

Zett had watched him furtively from the moment he had entered the room. Now he turned and faced him.

"How are you?" said Tennant, holding out his hand.

Zett slid his hand down the side of his clothes before placing it in Tennant's.

"I'm gettin' on, sir, thank 'ee."

"That's right."

"Now sit down," said Olive. "Sugar, Zett?"

"What you can spare."

Olive smiled, and Tennant remarked that "Mr. Zett had evidently a sweet tooth."

Zett hardly recognized himself with the Mr. tacked on to his name.

"There's times when I gets no sugar," he said slowly, after a moment's pause; "so I takes it when I can. You don't have them kind o' times, sir, maybe."

"Not in the way of sugar, perhaps," Tennant answered; "but in other ways, often. I fancy we all feel that kind of thing one way or another, eh, Miss Vaughan?"

"She's got all she wants now, I should think," was Zett's quick answer.

"Indeed I have not, nor have you; you want some jam. Pass Zett the jam, Mr. Tennant."

Taking this remark as a sign that she wished to make a little feast for her queer friend, Gilbert plied Zett assiduously with all the eatables there were upon the table, enjoying the fun, and wondering who Zett was.

Zett had never heard of afternoon tea. He was

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requested to sit down to a table upon which there were things to eat, and he made as square a meal as he could. There was always a certain amount of speculation about his next meal; it so entirely depended on his odd jobs, that he could not afford to lose an opportunity.

Presently he pushed back his chair and looked at Olive.

"I must be goin' now."

"There is no hurry."

"Ain't there, though? Gettin' back from here ain't like gettin' home from the old place. Good day, sir."

Olive went with him into the passage.

"Is he the cove what's doing all this 'ere for you?" he asked, jerking his thumb in the direction of the room they had just left.

"One of them."

"How many of 'em are there?"

"Two."

"Well, there's safety in numbers."

"Now, Zett, you must say no more such things to me, or I shall not ask you to come again."

"Are you goin' to?"

"Yes. You may come to-day week."

"I will if I can."

"Do you know, Zett, that if I gave such an invitation to anyone of my acquaintances they wouldn't let anything prevent them?"

"Maybe; but then I ain't a fool."

"That is not very polite."

"But it's the truth. If I'd got a job I couldn't come. Did you invite the cove in there?"

"No."

"He comes without, does he?"

"Yes; on business."

"And the other one?"

"He does not come very often."

"You're a bit lonely, then?"

"Hardly that. I have to work hard."

"What! just to sing them songs about nothing?"

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"Yes."

"I shouldn't 'a' thought it."

"Zett!"

"Well?"

Olive found it rather difficult to go on.

"I earn a lot of money now, you know, and I've often got more than I really want. I have now. Will you take this five-pound note? Perhaps you might get some new clothes."

"I shall want 'em soon, that's certain, but you can't buy 'em for me."

"I can. There's the money."

Zett looked at her and then at the note.

"Well, you ain't going to," he said. It sounded ungracious, but he did not mean it so.

"Why not?"

"I ain't goin' to take money from a girl."

"If a lady offered it to you for some service or other you would take it."

"I might."

"Well, you've done me many a service in the past."

"Maybe; but then you ain't a lady. Of course you've got on, but we played together as kids. You mean it all right, but it can't be done. Good-by. I'll come again afore long."

"To-day week."

"That ain't a promise." And Zett went up the road quickly, never looking back.

"'Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time,'" Gilbert quoted, when Olive returned to him.

"And with good hearts under their strange exterior," she answered.

"I do not doubt it."

"He is an old playmate of mine," she went on.

"He saw me leaving the Forum the other night, and I asked him to come and see me. There is no objection, I suppose?" She spoke a little defiantly.

"None in the world that I can see—now. At first of course it was different, for your own sake. Even now I do not think I should ask your—"

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"My father?" she suggested.

"I was not going to mention him. I was going to say your old friends generally."

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Tennant; I am far too ambitious to go back. Did you come in for anything particular this afternoon?"

"I brought a couple of songs. I thought we might introduce them into the musical comedy if they fit you. I think they are rather good, or will be when you sing them."

Olive opened the piano, and Gilbert sat down and played them through. To an ordinary listener they might possibly have sounded commonplace, but the composer knew who the singer was to be. That made all the difference.

"I think I can make them go. Will you leave them with me?"

"I will let you have them in a day or two. I can improve them, I think. I don't want you to sing them at the Forum, you know. When is your time up there?"

"I am staying there until the end of the month."

"And then you will get a holiday before the rehearsals of the new piece. I am glad of that. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

Gilbert hesitated.

"Pure inquisitiveness, I think."

"No, no. Out with it. Why do you ask? Were you going to make a suggestion?"

"I—no, of course not. Overton told me that he had offered you his cottage somewhere or other—where was it?"

"Near Brighton. Very kind of him, wasn't it?"

"Very."

Olive laughed.

"Come, Mr. Tennant, you are a bad hand at playing hide and seek. Mr. Overton has been asking you to try and persuade me to accept his offer, hasn't he?"

"No—that is, not exactly. He did say that he

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thought you foolish not to accept it, or something of that sort."

"Do you think I am foolish, Mr. Tennant?"

"I think it is a case in which you must please yourself."

"I expected a different answer from you," Olive returned; "but never mind. Mr. Overton is a friend of yours, and one of my—what shall we say?—masters."

"Friends sounds better," said Tennant.

"Yes; but would it be quite—there, I won't be uncharitable. I have decided not to go, so there is an end of it."

"Quite," said Tennant, with a laugh. "You are a wonderful woman."

"Thanks to you."

"I have helped a little, perhaps, but it was in you. You would have done something extraordinary even if I—if we had not helped you."

"I might. I don't know. After all, I haven't done very much yet."

"That is not the exact truth," said Gilbert enthusiastically; "but it's the right spirit. You are only at the beginning of your career; nine out of ten women would be content to remain where you are. Your goal is the legitimate drama, and the top of that. You remember what I said when we first talked of all this. You were to make me famous some day—the great actress in my great masterpiece. You have made me more or less famous by singing my songs as no one else could, but you are going to do more for me yet. See what an altogether selfish beggar I am. You have gone far to becoming the great actress—I have written nearly half the play."

"May I see it?"

"Not yet. You must not even speak of it for the present."

"You might let me see it." She laid a little stress on the "me." She was woman enough to know the efficacy of it.

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"Perhaps I will read it to you—some afternoon when you have nothing better to do."

"To-morrow?"

"Upon my word, Olive, you are nearly as excited about it as I am myself."

Her name slipped out. He was always so careful to call her Miss Vaughan. She heard it, but took no notice.

"I should like to help you in your triumph," she said; "and if I know the play and the character I am to study, I can think it out quietly until the time comes."

"My triumph! I wonder, will it ever come?"

"Of course it will."

"Perhaps. I think so myself sometimes, but—I am afraid this is rather like practicing one's bow to the audience before the play is written, before one has achieved anything to merit their applause."

"Not at all, Mr. Tennant. You have told me often enough that to be enthusiastic is half way toward the prize. It is my turn to encourage you now."

She watched him from the window as he went down the road, and a little sigh escaped her. There was a little corner in her heart where Gilbert Tennant, all unconsciously, had found a resting place. Olive had never known anybody quite like him. Nobody had ever been so kind to her as he had been, and except Zett, who could hardly count, there was no one she thought so much of as Gilbert Tennant. She did not love him—at least not with that kind of love which she read of in books, and which always seemed to her rather foolish; but certainly she felt toward him as she felt toward no other person in the world.

"I suppose I ought not to," she said, turning from the window to look in the glass for a moment. "He is married, and probably thinks there is no one in the world like his wife. Gilbert would think like that. She ought to be a very, very happy woman. If he were not married, and he asked me to marry him, I believe I should. But then he wouldn't ask me. What

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did he say about practicing the bow before writing the play? That is exactly what you are doing, Olive Vaughan." And Mrs. Lambert, entering the room at that moment, found Olive shaking her finger at her reflection in the glass.

CHAPTER X

OVERTON MAKES A CONFESSION

"HE must find out for himself; I'm not going to give an opinion one way or the other. In fact, I have not got an opinion. She may have been pumping me, for all I know."

Such thoughts occupied Gilbert's mind as he went toward his own door in Harmony Road. He had promised Overton, in a half-hearted sort of way, that he would try and find out what Olive really thought of him, and he was dining with Overton at the Phoenix to-night. The children ran into the hall at the sound of his latchkey in the door, a noisy, boisterous welcome, as it always was. His wife's was quieter, but under certain circumstances might be more impressive.

"You've brought some money, haven't you, Gilbert?"

"My dear, the Bank of England was so alarmed at the leakage of gold I caused that the directors put the rate up."

"I wish you would be serious sometimes, dear."

"My dear, I was born under a trivial star; you must not ask for the impossible. What is the trouble?"

"I must pay Jane's wages to-night—she asked for them—a pound; and the man called for the gas, and they called for the rates, and the man who mended the bathroom window came and said there was a little account due. I thought you said you had paid that."

"Possibly. He may have made a mistake. There may be no little account due."

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"They must be paid, Gilbert."

"Of course they must, dearest; and as it happens, they couldn't have called at a better time, for I have some money. If they had left it another two days I should probably have spent it."

Gilbert turned out his pockets and produced a little heap of gold and silver and a couple of checks.

"No wonder the Bank of England quaked," laughed Mrs. Tennant. "Where did you get it all from?"

"Some people think my triviality worth paying for. You know that stupid song I sang you a little while ago, and you wondered how I could write such stuff—well, this check is for that song. It will be introduced into the 'Girl of Bagdad' next Saturday evening, and I shouldn't be surprised if you hear it on the piano organs before long. It will make you think of me when you are dusting the bedroom in the morning, won't it?"

"It's cheap fame, Gilbert—now, isn't it really?"

"Of course it is; but it's mighty useful, and it's going to give a knockout blow to that furious gas man and the tax collector. Joking apart, Mary, you shouldn't worry yourself so much now. Times are changing with us, my dear. I have made more in the last six months than I did in the previous eighteen months. That last novel of mine is going well. I got another check for royalties to-day. It's property, Mary. With a little more luck, I shall have quite a respectable fortune to leave behind me in copyrights. Times are changing, my dear. That trivial star of mine is in the ascendant.

"I am glad. I am sometimes afraid, Gilbert, that I don't appreciate you as I ought to."

"Oh, yes, you do; only you don't know it. My genius is a fearful and wonderful thing. See how long the public have been finding it out. Now—by Jove! look at the time. I must go and tumble into evening dress."

"You are dining in town?"

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"Yes; I told you—with Overton. I shall not be late."

"Aren't we going to have a game first, father?" said Mavis, running into the room ready and eager for the fray.

"Not to-night, pickle."

"What a shame!"

"Stupid old Overton," said Frank, from the doorway. "Why can't he eat his silly dinner by himself?"

"Too much of it; give him a pain," said Gilbert. "I tell you what—if mother will let me, I'll wake you up when I come home, and we'll have our romp then; if mother will let me, mind." And while the children rushed to persuade mother to say yes, Gilbert escaped to dress.

Overton's cab drew up at the Phoenix as Gilbert was going up the steps.

"Punctuality itself," he said.

"I am turning over a new leaf."

"You must be turning over the shekels, too, by this time. I saw your name mentioned in the *Lookout* today among the coming great ones of the earth. Have you a friend on that review?"

"No. If I had, he would know what an exceedingly small personage I am."

"Don't be too humble, Tennant; it doesn't pay."

In the hall Overton stopped to glance at the letter rack. "That letter still there for Densham."

"You seem interested in this Densham. I have heard you speak of him before, and as if you did not like him much."

"On the contrary, I rather like him, and I certainly am interested in him. He is a man who has run crooked most of his life, and is now trying to run straight. I am watching his progress."

"And giving him a helping hand?" asked Tennant.

Overton shrugged his shoulders, and Gilbert concluded that he was.

They were half through dinner before Overton

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broached the subject he was particularly anxious to talk about.

"Have you seen Olive lately?"

"I saw her this afternoon. Yes; I have seen her a good many times since we last talked about her."

"Well?"

"I know no more than you do."

"But I thought you were going to find out for me?"

"I said I would try," Gilbert answered; "and so I have, in a way. The fact of the matter is, Overton, you set me a difficult task. She is not an easy woman to fathom."

"That is true; but I thought you might do it. There was a supper in her honor last night, and I was there. I cannot make her out. I didn't care one way or the other a little while ago, but now I am mad if she seems interested in another man."

Gilbert sipped his wine and said nothing.

"I wouldn't whisper it to anyone else in the world, Tennant, but I love that woman—love her enough to hate her if she is not kind to me."

"I have been afraid of it," said Gilbert quietly.

"Afraid of what?"

"That you were falling in love with her."

"Falling in love!" said Overton contemptuously;

"I tell you, man, I'm mad about her. I can hardly take my eyes from her when she is near me. I grind my teeth to prevent myself throwing my arms round her and claiming her mine, whether she will or no. A sober-going fellow like you does not understand that sort of passion, I suppose?"

"Candidly, no. It savors a little too much of the unholy."

"Unholy! Rubbish."

"At any rate I should expect it from a love-sick youth rather than from you."

"Because you don't understand. Love is a passion, and because it is so, has something of what you are pleased to call the unholy in it. I have caught the

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fever after my first youth, therefore it is a hundred times worse than it could ever have been before. She refused to accept my cottage for her holiday. I have a kind of jealous dread that she would have accepted such an offer from anyone else. She does not treat me like she does other men."

"Perhaps you do not treat her as other men do," said Gilbert.

"How can I? Haven't I done more for her than anyone else in the world has? Haven't I lifted her from poverty to what she is now? Haven't I taken her from obscurity and helped to make her famous? How can I be expected to treat her as other men do?"

"She is not a woman who would like to be reminded of her obligations."

"I don't remind her of them."

"Your manner may."

"How can it?"

"I don't know; I have so seldom seen you together," said Tennant.

"I have never done a thing, never said a word, that her own mother, if she had one, might not have heard and approved."

"That would not be difficult if her mother were of the same kidney as her father," said Tennant.

"I am not joking. I am not in the humor for it," answered Overton.

"It was not intended as a joke. What her mother might have approved is such a speculation that I was shutting that door of excuse upon you. Have you ever said anything to her that a good woman—like my wife, for instance—would not approve?"

"Never."

"But you would like to," said Tennant.

The two men looked hard at each other across the little table, reading each other's thoughts. Then Overton's eyes fell.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I think it is true."

There was a pause.

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"Even my bitterest critics give me credit for understanding men," Gilbert went on. "The love you talk about, Overton, is an unholy passion—nothing more nor less—a mere passing thing that, once satisfied, leaves only Dead Sea fruit behind. There isn't a whisper of the true ring about it. What you love is the beauty—the form of the woman; herself, her real self, is nothing. I can see it. I know it, not by what you say, but by your manner. Do you suppose Olive Vaughan is such a fool as not to understand it too? No wonder she refused your offer of the cottage at Brighton."

"You wrong me, Tennant."

"I am sorry, but I am obliged to speak out."

"You wrong me," Overton said again. "I will confess that she might have tempted me to the love you speak of. She roused it in me, but the wrong sank out of it as I knew her better."

Gilbert shook his head in disbelief.

"It is true—I swear it. I mean to ask Olive Vaughan to be my wife."

"Because you are satisfied that she will not be your mistress. Your proposal, Overton, will be a doubtful honor."

"That is an unjust thing to say."

"Well, that is my way of looking at it."

"It is carping criticism," said Overton. "You would prevent half the marriages which take place by such an arrangement."

"And a very good thing, too," said Tennant, rising and followed Overton into the smoking room.

Overton smoked a cigar for some time in silence.

"I think, Tennant, you misunderstand me somewhat," he said presently. "You seem to fancy that the idea has occurred to me to ask Olive Vaughan to be my mistress, and, in some manner which I cannot fathom, connect the Brighton cottage with the arrangement. Nothing was ever further from my thoughts. I have said that she might have tempted me to such a thing, not that I conceived it."

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"Isn't that rather a distinction without a difference?"

"Not at all. However much one might admire Olive Vaughan, one could hardly start from the same base with her. When she came to us one could admire, but would hardly have thought of marrying her. Cannot you understand me when I say that in those days I admired her enough to be weak had she tempted me? Now it is different. She has developed into what she is, and I love her as she is, not as she was. You are very dull of comprehension to-night."

He smiled as he flicked the ash from his cigar. He could not afford to let Tennant go away with a wrong impression.

"I may be," answered Tennant; "I listened for the true ring, and I could not hear it, that was all. Olive Vaughan is a good strong woman. I told you so long ago, when she was in the factory-girls' club. She has proved my words, for she has had plenty of opportunities to run off the lines—may have had, for all I know, temptations to do so. I have a real affection for her which, were I a single man, might possibly develop into love, and this affection makes me jealous of even an attack against her good name. I do not fear for her in the matter, but it is so easy for a whisper to get about concerning a woman situated as she is. I am in a measure responsible for her, for, after all, it is not only due to you that she is what she is. Without our help she would have achieved something—we only made the way easier. And being responsible, I intend to protect her all I can."

"Have I your permission, then, to ask her to be my wife?"

Overton tried hard to keep the sneer out of his voice.

"Certainly."

"And you will give your consent to our marriage?"

"Yes; when she does."

Overton looked at his companion. There was some-

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thing in his tone which made him think that Tennant knew he would not succeed.

"You think she will not consent?"

"I feel convinced she will not, if she has ever caught a glimpse of the kind of love you have been professing for her to-night."

"A little more, and I expect we should quarrel about it," laughed Overton. "We are too old friends to do that. I have always said you do not understand women."

"And with all your wisdom, Overton, you do not understand such women as Olive Vaughan."

"I hope I do," Overton answered. "When a woman is the same to all men and strange in her manner only to one, that one has some reason for supposing that she is peculiarly interested in him. I mean to try my fortune, Tennant."

Then Overton changed the subject. He exerted himself to make Tennant interested in one thing after another. He had always looked upon his companion as a man to whom he was something of a hero, as one he could influence and use if need be. He did not like the prospect of losing his power. It was, however, difficult to interest Tennant to-night. He pleaded a promise to his wife to be home early, and left soon after half past nine.

"I made a mistake," Overton said to himself when he was left alone. "I ought not to have said so much, or perhaps I ought to have said more—I hardly know which. What does it matter? I mean to win; if not one way, then the other. Olive Vaughan shall be mine, or by—" he broke off and smiled. "This is getting absurdly excited about a small matter. If I am at a discount, my money is at a premium, and it is money wins in the long run with these women."

It was curious that Gilbert Tennant going home should read Overton's thoughts almost exactly.

"He means to win her one way or the other; but if I know Olive at all, he will fail. And then? Revenge. For the first time in my life I distrust him.

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I believe he could be mean enough to take revenge. And he has the power to do it. I wonder whether I ought to warn her?"

The question puzzled him until he reached home. Then he decided to wait. He had cause to deeply regret it afterwards.

"I think she can be trusted to take care of herself," he said.

The children were asleep, and it is needless to say that Mrs. Tennant decided not to wake them; but there was a tremendous romp next morning.

CHAPTER XI

AN HONORABLE PROPOSAL

"I do not understand what you mean, Mrs. Lambert."

Olive turned round sharply and faced the house-keeper. There was a heightened color in her cheeks and a dangerous look in her eyes.

"I only said, my dear, that I didn't think Mr. Edward would like it."

"Would not like what, Mrs. Lambert?"

"That cripple man coming here quite so often."

Zett had only just left. He had been to see Olive two or three times since his first visit.

"Mr. Overton has nothing whatever to do with it," answered Olive hotly. "I am not accountable to Mr. Overton for what acquaintances I make, or whom I invite to see me."

"Is that quite true, my dear? I always thought this house belonged to Mr. Edward."

"It does."

"And everything that is in it. Is it not so, my dear?"

"No, Mrs. Lambert. I am in it, and I do not belong to Mr. Overton. You can go."

An angry retort rose to the woman's lips, but a glance at her mistress told her that silence would be the more prudent course just then. She had got to the door when Olive stopped her.

"Stay!" she said. "Please understand, Mrs. Lambert, that if there is any recurrence of interference on your part you will leave my service—my service, do you quite understand? I will ring if I want you."

"I meant no offense."

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"You gave it. That is sufficient," and with a wave of her hand Olive dismissed her.

Mrs. Lambert's interference on behalf of Mr. Edward, as she always called Overton, was peculiarly ill-timed. It set Olive's thoughts working in a direction in which she had studiously endeavored not to let them run. Latterly it had become more difficult to prevent them running in this direction. While she was quite an obscure person it had not mattered much where she lived or who helped her—the world takes no interest in nobodies; but now she was, in her way, somebody, it was quite a different matter. The world gets inquisitive about the somebodies, and is not content to know them as lights of their profession. It wants to know all the ins and outs of their private life as well. The society journalist is always lying in wait for his prey to make copy out of, and there is no victim makes such excellent copy as an actress. Any rumors he likes to set going about her will be believed by some of his readers, and fifth-rate clerks, with a desire to be considered men of the world, will repeat the rumors with little embellishments, as if the whole circumstances were within their own personal knowledge.

It is quite possible that Olive had heard, at one time or another, such whispers concerning herself; but they had been so vague, and she was so little known, that she had considered them of small consequence. With her growing popularity, and her increasing knowledge and refinement, the necessity of fencing in her good name had appealed more strongly to her. She had thought much about it lately, and Mrs. Lambert's remarks had somewhat the same effect upon her that a blow would have had. It stunned her and distorted things out of their due proportions. Mrs. Lambert had spoken in the interests of Edward Overton. Why? What made her think it necessary to speak of Zett's visits at all. Was Mrs. Lambert there to watch her and report her doings to Edward Overton? The idea of such a thing was unbearable.

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To do the housekeeper justice, there was no real malice behind her interference. When Overton had asked her to take charge of the house in Harmony Road, she had refused to do so without knowing the exact circumstances. She had no intention of being used even by Mr. Edward, for whom she would have done almost anything in the world, as a cloak, as a false sign of respectability where there was none. As time elapsed she formed her own opinion of affairs. She saw that Olive was being trained and fitted for a higher station in life, and she jumped to the conclusion that Mr. Edward intended to make her his wife. It was from this point of view that she had spoken to her young mistress, and if ever words were spoken out of season, hers were.

She had been nursing her anger at Olive's imperious dismissal for half an hour when the front-door bell rang. It was Edward Overton.

"Is Miss Vaughan in?"

"Yes, Mr. Edward."

Olive opened the room door. She had no intention of allowing Mrs. Lambert to tell any tales about her.

"How are you, Mr. Overton? Come in. I am quite alone."

"And enjoying a lazy afternoon with no worry about to-night," he answered, following her and closing the door. "You have thoroughly earned a rest. I expect the Forum will be half empty to-night."

"Oh, no, it won't. I think I was getting a little stale, you know. The public was beginning to get tired of my songs."

"I am quite sure the public was doing nothing of the kind. And after a holiday you will begin rehearsals for the piece to follow 'The Girl of Bagdad.'"

"Yes."

"And where are you going for a holiday?"

"I haven't decided. I am not at all sure that I shall go away at all."

"That would be a pity," Overton returned. "The new piece will take a lot out of you if it is anything

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of a success. I should strongly advise a good holiday. You won't reconsider your decision about the Brighton cottage? It is empty and entirely at your service."

"Thank you, no. I——"

"You are frightened of getting further into my debt," laughed Overton. "Please don't let that trouble you. I am a shareholder in the Forum, you know, and am expecting an increased dividend this half year, besides which I am financially interested in the new piece, so that anything I have spent upon you is an exceedingly good investment."

"That is not my reason," she answered.

"No?" he said, with a slight elevation of his eyebrows. "Then I am at a loss. I meant the offer kindly, I can assure you."

"I know; and I am afraid I did not thank you as I ought to have done. I am glad you are here; there are one or two things I wanted to talk to you about."

"I am all attention. My will is at your disposal," he said, with a smile.

Olive smoothed out a ribbon of her dress, drawing it through her fingers as though intent upon eradicating the slightest crease in it. It was only within the last half hour that she had determined to say what she was going to say.

"You remember the night of the supper?"

"Perfectly."

"Some one spoke to me at the stage door just as we were leaving—a cripple."

"I remember. You were rather angry with me because I asked who he was."

"Oh, no, not angry. He is an old playmate of mine. I was a girl when I first knew him. He was very friendless—and so was I for that matter—and he was somehow drawn toward me."

"I can easily understand that."

"I did not jeer at him as others did," Olive went on. "I told him that night he might come to see me. He came next day, and he has been two or three times since. He was here this afternoon."

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"Well?"

"Do you see any harm in it?"

"Harm!" exclaimed Overton. "What harm could there possibly be? My dear Miss Vaughan, what sort of an individual do you take me for?"

"Mrs. Lambert informed me that she was quite sure you would not like it."

"What right had Mrs. Lambert to express an opinion at all upon the matter?" asked Overton rather angrily.

"She fancied she was speaking in your interests."

"Has she ever presumed to do such a thing before?"

"Never."

"We'll have her in, and give her a talking to," said Overton, rising and going toward the bell.

"No; don't ring. I think I said all that was necessary. She only spoke in your interests, I am sure, when she informed me that this house belonged to you, and all that was in it."

"Let me ring the bell," said Overton.

"Please, no. She meant no harm. I do not think she will repeat the offense. But her words, Mr. Overton, put a head, as it were, to a mass of thoughts which have been accumulating gradually. I dare say you recollect a promise you made me that if things went well, and I could afford it, you would let me repay you. I want to begin."

She rose and went to an escritoire.

"My dear Miss Vaughan——"

Olive placed some notes upon the table and some gold.

"What is the rent of this house?" she asked.

"Fifty pounds a year, I believe."

"Then I want to pay the rent. I can afford it. I want you to let me know what I have cost you from first to last; there is a hundred pounds in part payment of my debt, and I want to pay off the rest by degrees, and pay the rent quarterly."

Overton laughed.

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"It is no laughing matter to me," Olive went on gravely. "It was a bargain. Things have gone well. I am only fulfilling my part of the compact."

"This silly old woman's impudence has put this idea into your head."

"Indeed it has not. She only made me see more clearly the necessity of it."

"Believe me, Miss Vaughan, there is no necessity. I am a rich man, far richer probably than you suppose. I do not spend a quarter of my income."

"That really only makes the matter worse," said Olive. "Cannot you look upon the circumstances from my point of view?"

"I do. The money you have saved is a great deal to you. Why should I take it?"

"Mr. Overton, my living here did not matter at first. I dare say people talked. But I was nobody in particular, and they soon tired of talking. It is quite different now. People may imagine, like Mrs. Lambert, that everything in this house belongs to you—everything, do you understand?"

"Our positions have been so clear to me that I have not."

"No; but now you do. You must take the money for my sake."

She pushed the notes and the gold across the table toward him. He let his hand rest gently on hers.

"Miss Vaughan, there is a better way," he said. "Of course at first people wondered. I think you knew they would, and were prepared to ignore them. If tongues are busy again, you may silence them once and for always."

She withdrew her hand.

"You mean?"

"I mean that I love you, Olive. Don't start away from me, dearest. I have loved you almost from the first moment I saw you. I loved you against my will. I fought against it. I have kept away from you all to no purpose. I love you with all the love a man can

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give, his first and last passion. Olive, will you be my wife?"

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Overton, but——"

"I don't want an answer now. I don't expect it," he said.

"Please, it must be now. I cannot marry you. I don't love you. I——"

"Olive, do you know what love is?"

"No."

"Then how do you know that you do not love me?"

"I know. I am certain of that. Don't think me unkind or ungrateful, but I do not love you, I am certain of that."

Overton bit his lips underneath his mustache.

"I can have had no rival, since you do not know what love is," he said.

"I love no one," she answered. "I like you, and Zett, the cripple you know, and Mr. Tennant. I like you better to-day than I have done before."

"Ah! That is an admission. I shall treasure it."

"You mustn't. It means nothing, because until to-day I have not really liked you at all."

"It begins from to-day. Why not?" said Overton. "The field is empty. Why should I not hope to win?"

"There is no hope. Please believe that, Mr. Overton."

"Are you afraid I should want you to give up your profession? You shall do exactly as you like."

"I was not thinking of that. I only know I do not love you, that I can never be your wife."

"Never is a long road," answered Overton, "and I am a traveler incapable of fatigue. I take your answer now, but I shall still hope. So long as no other claims you, you cannot rob me of my hope."

"You have my answer, Mr. Overton. I am sorry, but it is the only one I have to give, shall ever have to give."

"It is kind of you to have listened to me," said Overton, taking up his hat. "I was ever an indiffer-

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ent pleader in my own cause. I must let my actions plead for me."

"And you will take the money?"

"If you wish it," he said, putting the notes and gold into his pocket. "I will let you know the total amount of your indebtedness to me, and I will send you a receipt for this payment. Only promise me one thing. You will not scruple to let me know if you are in difficulties. I claim that right."

"I promise."

"Friends then for the present," he said, holding out his hand.

"For always," she answered, taking his hand, and looking straight into his eyes.

"Now that we understand each other, and you like me better, may I again offer the Brighton cottage?"

"I would rather not. Thank you all the same."

"Good-by, then."

He turned at the door.

"Should Mrs. Lambert repeat her insolence, let me know. We will soon send her packing."

Overton went out, closing the front door quietly behind him. He had expected better success, but he had not failed entirely. She liked him better. He had gone up in her estimation. He had played the right cards, and they might prove the winning hand in the end. If not, there were other cards he could play. The game won that way would suit him just as well as the other—perhaps better.

"Yes; perhaps better," he said to himself more than once as he went back to town.

Olive remained standing where he had left her. He had taken the money. She felt that she had gained her independence. But her idea of Edward Overton had changed. It had never entered into her head that he would want to marry her. She would not have been surprised at a different kind of proposal from him, and she had prepared herself for it. A revulsion of feeling came, making herself hateful in her own eyes. She had schooled herself to be ready to answer

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a dishonorable proposal; she had received an honorable one. That she had so misjudged a man was hateful. There must be something wrong in herself, she argued, to make her capable of doing so.

"There are cobwebs in my brain," she said—"cobwebs which have been catching the dust these past few months. I must blow them away."

She took a letter which she had received that day from her desk.

"I will telegraph first thing in the morning," she said; "a portmanteau will hold all I want. I can post a letter to Mrs. Lambert when I am well on my way, and nobody shall know where I am, or anything about me. An adventure. It suits my mood exactly."

When Gilbert Tennant called two days later, he was told that Miss Vaughan had gone for a holiday.

"Mr. Edward was here the day before she went—he may know where she has gone to—I don't. She went away in the morning with only a portmanteau, and later in the day I had a letter from her to say that she wouldn't be back for a fortnight at least."

Mrs. Lambert was very irate at being left in the dark in this manner.

Tennant was troubled and went to see Overton. His surprise was evidently genuine, and Tennant was easier in his mind.

The person most concerned was Zett. Mrs. Lambert was rather pleased to vent her anger upon him. She got it into her head that he was the cause of all the trouble, for she could not persuade herself that there was not trouble somewhere.

"She's gone," said the housekeeper, when Zett called.

"Gone! For good?"

"Yes; gone for good."

Zett stood there as if stunned.

"Didn't she leave no message?"

"No."

"Nothin' for me?"

"No; why should she?"

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"I don't know. Ain't you got no idea where she is?"

"No more than the man in the moon."

Zett turned away with something like a sob in his throat.

"Gone!" he said. "Gone, an' never told me. She might 'a' told me. I shall have to begin lookin' for her all over again. I shall find her—I did before—I shall again. She might 'a' told me."

CHAPTER XII

AT FELSTEAD

ON the morning after her departure from Harmony Road, Olive awoke in a long narrow bedroom whose ceiling sloped at one end. Indeed, the ceiling, where it was straight, was so low that, standing on tiptoe, she could almost touch it. There were two windows, pointed like miniature church windows, with casements which opened outward. The morning sunlight came full into the room, and tried in vain to discover a speck of dust. From the bed with its muslin curtains and lavender-scented sheets to the towels hanging by the washstand there was no speck of dust, no disorder, nothing out of its place. The chairs and the table were old-fashioned, straight high-backed chairs, which had a defiant look, as though daring any one to sit on them, and the thin-legged table seemed conscious of its own beauty, and that it was an ornament to be looked at, not an article to be used. Even the toilet table, with its oval glass and small candle branches, looked as if nobody less beautiful than itself ought to use it. That beveled glass in its inlaid frame was never intended to reflect anything ugly or even commonplace. The paper on the walls had tiny pink roses which twisted and turned into continuous wreaths, as if the designer, having begun, had become so fascinated with his work that he had never been able to make up his mind to finish it. And tiny pink roses were in the carpet, and pink roses again upon the crockery, and when Olive jumped up and opened the windows there was a little shower of pink roses at the sills nodding in the morning breeze and scattering lavish perfume. She had a foolish fancy that the

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beautiful world at her feet was a joyous child, and these were its curls dancing as it played.

Olive felt happy, peacefully and supremely happy. It was a room to be happy in, a room to be good in. Evil would have been ashamed to rest in it. Surely nothing evil could ever rest in lavender sheets and be surrounded by pink roses?

Olive hummed a song as she dressed—not one of those which had charmed the audience at the Forum, but a merry little tune that had stolen into her memory somehow, without a name and without an association. And as accompaniment there was the song of the birds under the eaves, and the stir of life from the farmyard below, and somewhere in the distance the musical sharpening of a scythe.

She put on a light-blue gown with a white ribbon at the waist, and a little white lace at the throat; and it is very certain that the superior beveled glass in the toilet table could have no objection to reflect back such a picture. Then she tripped down the shallow stairs and into the kitchen.

It was the kitchen because the cooking was done there, and there was a brick floor, and a dresser overflowing with plates; but it was a sitting room as well. There was a carpet in the center, and more straight-backed chairs like those upstairs, and two huge arm chairs with wings to them, and a tall clock in the corner. There were pictures on the walls—colored prints of hunting scenes; there was a riding whip upon a side table; and over the fireplace there was a gun.

“Good morning, Mrs. Mackenzie.”

The woman bending over the fire to make certain the eggs were boiled exactly the right time, turned quickly.

“Good morning, miss. I do hope you slept well, and found everything comfortable.”

“It was just lovely. I began to dream the most delightful dreams the moment I put my head upon the pillow, and I never stopped dreaming until I

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awoke this morning, and then I found myself in a fairy room in fairyland."

"How you talk! I'm sure there's nothing wonderful about the room, although, mind you, I'm quite certain there isn't a prettier one in these parts."

"I am sure there cannot be."

"And now, miss, with morning have you changed your mind? There's the parlor you can have, and welcome. I'll have your breakfast laid in there in a minute, if you wish."

"No; I want to be one of the family. In your advertisement you said your visitor could, if he or she chose, you know."

"Certainly we did, miss; but then you see we didn't expect quite such a young lady as you."

"Do you mean you expected an older woman?"

"No; not older; but—well, you know, not quite such a lady."

Olive laughed.

"You see, miss, we're such old-fashioned folks, Robin and me—Robin, that's my husband, miss. I used to call him Robin when I was your age and he was courting me, and I've never got out of it, and some of the neighbors laugh at me because the name doesn't fit him, he's so big and noisy; oh, he's terribly noisy, miss, when he's in a good humor; and you put him in a good humor the moment you came in at the door yesterday."

"That's splendid. You'll let me be one of the family, won't you? and if I can help you, you'll let me, won't you? and I'm not to be turned into the parlor, am I?"

"Of course you shan't, my lass; I'll see to it. You put just a wee bit faith in Robin Mackenzie, whose been sae lang o'er the border that no one can tell he's a Scotchman." And then there was a great laugh, which made the plates on the dresser rattle.

"Robin, for shame; you'll frighten the child."

If the Scotch was still on his tongue when he got excited, Mr. Mackenzie was not a typical Scotchman.

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He was much more of the John Bull type—hale, hearty, and rosy-faced. He was always laughing—it mattered not whether there were anything to laugh at or not. His own jokes aroused his merriment just as much as other people's jokes—perhaps more. If he anticipated a bad harvest, he laughed just as heartily as if he expected a good one. If somebody got the better of him, which, by the way, was not often—he was Scotchman enough to prevent that—he laughed; and if his wife reprimanded him for anything, he laughed more than ever.

He did now as Olive wished him good morning.

"You're right welcome to live along with us," he said. "When we had this floor up some years since I had to have meals in the parlor for a while, and it took my appetite away. A week of it and I'd 'a' been a thin mon. You sit down, lass, and you make yourself at home, and do just what you like. You're here for a bit o' holiday, and you just enjoy yourself; and if ye wants to come to market with me on Saturday, why, ye shall, and I'll be right proud to have such a pretty face along with me in the cart."

"For shame, Robin; you're making the child blush."

"And for what may cheeks be, Jane, if they ain't to blush with?"

"You mustn't mind him," said Mrs. Mackenzie. "He'd talk just the same if the Queen was sitting there."

Robin laughed and sat down to breakfast.

Two hens walked up to the door, which opened into the garden, and looked in. It would seem that they were familiar with the laugh, but they had no business there, and Mrs. Mackenzie went out to drive them away.

"She'll say it's my fault when she comes back," said Robin.

"And you will laugh at her," said Olive.

"That's good. We understands each other already."

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"Robin," said Mrs. Mackenzie, as she reëntered the room, "you must have let them fowls in when you came through the gate."

"I told you so," laughed her husband; "I told you so. When the Alderney died a month ago it was my fault, and the mare would never have gone lame if I hadn't happened to be in London at the time."

"Well, if you didn't let them in, the wire netting in the hedge yonder must be broken," said Mrs. Mackenzie.

"Very like; and if they didn't get in that way, they got in some other; and you've forgotten to give me my coffee; and I'm the worst treated husband anywhere around Felstead."

"You're a deal of trouble to me, Robin."

"It wouldna' do for anyone else to say that," said Mr. Mackenzie to Olive in a stage whisper. "She'd be after them like she was after them fowls just now. So you are having a bit o' holiday?"

"Yes."

"And ye think ye'll be able to enjoy it here, eh?"

"I'm sure of it."

"And why for do you want a holiday? You look as if you'd never had a day's illness in your life."

"But I work, and therefore deserve a holiday."

"Do ye work? And what do you do?"

"I sing," Olive answered.

"That ain't much of a living, is it?"

"I earn a lot of money."

"That's good; Jane, why don't you sing and earn a lot of money, and then I needn't do any work at all?"

"I'm ashamed of you, Robin."

Mrs. Mackenzie seemed to be in a constant state of shame for her husband.

"I used to sing," said Robin. "I used to be in the choir, and they said I was bass, I think it was, and because I was bass they wouldna' let me sing the tune, and as I couldna' sing anything else they suggested I'd be more at home in the church than in the choir, and there I've sat ever since."

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"And folks look at him every Sabbath, wondering at the noise he makes," said his wife.

"Parson says, 'Be hearty, whatever you do, be hearty.' That's what I am when I sing. You shall sit alongside of me, lass, and we'll give 'em a bit o' singing together next Sunday, and Jane will be ashamed of us both."

They had just finished breakfast when a man came to the door.

"What is it?"

"You're wanted, sir."

"Who by?"

"The Squire."

"All right. I'll be with him in a minute. You'll be coming out in the yard presently," he said, turning to Olive. "You've only got to whistle and I'll come and take you anywhere you want to go. I'm proud of the farm."

"I shall come and look for you presently."

"That's good. Make yourself at home; and if you want anything, and we've got it, you shall have it. If we haven't got it, you can't."

"Robin," said Mrs. Mackenzie reproachfully.

"I know, Jane. The lass and I understands each other. We're going to be excellent friends." And with another great laugh he took up his hat and went out, followed by an admonition from his wife to be sure and close the garden gate and not let the fowls in.

"Now, Mrs. Mackenzie, what can I do?" said Olive.

"Do? Get your hat and go out."

Olive shook her head.

"Not yet," she said. "I'm one of the family, you know, and I am going to do some work first."

"Bless the child! What a strange person you are! You've come here for a holiday and you want to work."

"Quite a lazy holiday won't suit me a bit, Mrs. Mackenzie," Olive persisted, and the good lady was obliged to accept her help.

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When at last she went into the garden she heard Robin Mackenzie's great laugh somewhere close by in the farmyard. He was evidently just taking leave of his visitor.

"That's a nice mare you're riding, Squire."

"She's well enough to look at, but she's a bit vicious. She's like so many handsome two-legged creatures of her sex, Mackenzie."

"Is that your experience, Squire? It ain't mine."

"Then you may account yourself a lucky man," the other laughed. It was rather a hollow laugh, no merriment in it.

"It may be that you've been extraordinarily unfortunate in your experiences," said Mackenzie. "I wish you better luck. You're young enough yet to look forward to a good many years' happiness."

"I don't look forward, Mackenzie, I can assure you. I find it more profitable to live in the present, and neither look forward nor backward. Good morning. I'll send over for the straw this afternoon."

From the garden Olive saw the Squire ride out of the yard. She only caught a glimpse of his face; she would have liked to see more, because the conversation she could not help overhearing had interested her. Here was a man, either cynical to a degree, the kind of man she instinctively despised; or else one who had suffered, and whose nature had become warped in consequence; such a one she could thoroughly pity. That the mare was troublesome was evidently true, for she danced out of the yard into the road with a very apparent desire to be free from the master who rode her.

Robin Mackenzie caught sight of the blue dress in the garden and joined Olive.

"Ye'll have been hearing what the Squire said about the women, eh?"

"I couldn't help hearing."

"It's a pity he spoke so loud. Such opinions are not for such ears as yours."

"In London we grow accustomed to such things,

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Mr. Mackenzie. To be really innocent, it is not always wise to be ignorant."

"You've an old head on those young shoulders," laughed Mackenzie.

"I have seen a good deal of the world," Olive answered; "more than falls to the lot of most young women. Perhaps the Squire hardly meant all he said."

"And ye're a lass o' perception, too, it seems. That's my way of thinking. The Squire is not over-popular in these parts. Folks say he ought to live more among us and spend his money more among us. There's something in the argument, I dare say, though for that matter I think a man's got a right to do what he likes with his own. I like him well enough."

"He is not often here, then?"

"Until a little while back he was hardly ever here. The Hall was shut up in the charge of servants who were as close as though they'd got some secret to take care of. Now he seems to have come home for good, but it hasn't made much difference. There's never any company at the Hall, and the Squire goes nowhere as far as I can hear."

"Then he is rather a mystery?"

"Folks who have got nothing to do but talk have made a mystery of him. They've invented half a dozen stories and there doesn't appear to be a particle of truth in any one of them."

"He may have some reason for the bitter way he spoke of women," Olive said.

"Maybe. Some men get into the way of looking crookedly at life. It's a pity, a grand pity. And as a woman usually plays a big part in a man's life, I suppose the women are to blame for the state of affairs. At least, that's the popular notion, although, mind you, I shouldn't like to express such an opinion to Jane."

"I suppose women have a good deal of power, but it is not always for evil. That is where the popular idea is wrong. If a man goes to the bad, popular verdict says there's a woman to blame somewhere; if he

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excels in good works, popular verdict merely remarks what an excellent man he is."

Robin laughed as if she had made a good joke.

"That's true, that's very true. What a deal of perception the lass has, to be sure. Maybe you're just speaking from experience?"

He said it with a sly glance at her, and then laughed again.

"No, Mr. Mackenzie, I have no experience."

"Aye, ye will be having some day," he said; "then be merciful, lass."

"It never occurred to me that I looked such a dreadful person."

"You don't; but you're not ill-looking, and that fact may account for a deal o' mischief."

It was said in such good comradeship that Olive could not be angry.

"Does the Squire live near here?" she asked.

"Yes. You can see the house from the garden over here. It's a dismal-looking place enough."

He led the way to the other end of the garden. From there the view was across meadow land toward rising ground crowned with woods, and the house could be seen through the trees.

"If the place were mine, I should cut back the woods a bit and let more light in," Mackenzie said.

"It looks rather dismal."

"Yes. It isn't much wonder that Mr. Densham gets depressed at times."

"Mr. Densham!" said Olive.

"Victor Densham, that's his name. Do you know him?"

"No; but I have heard of him. I heard him spoken of in a way that made me rather interested in him."

"Well spoken of?"

"Yes; very well."

"I'm right glad to hear it," answered Mackenzie; "because it's rather the fashion to speak ill of him, and I've always liked him."

Olive thought a good deal about Victor Densham

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that day. It was natural, after what Zett had told her. Zett had been so positive that he was the right man to go to in any trouble, and Zett did not trust anybody very readily. It was strange, Olive thought, that quite unconsciously she should have come into Victor Densham's neighborhood. It made her feel that between this man and herself there was a link, a connection, very vague, very indefinite, yet none the less real. He knew her by name, not that there was anything curious in that, but he had evidently been rather interested in her when he spoke to Zett. Could he by chance know her history? Had he at some time come into her old life without her knowing it? It was not likely. She looked in the glass, and thought of the Forum and Mackenzie's remark that she was not ill-looking.

"Perhaps that was why he was interested," she thought. She was angry that the idea troubled her, but it did. People, not so careful to be exact as Robin Mackenzie, often said she was beautiful, and a man is always interested in a beautiful woman. It was not the first time she had felt degraded in this way.

She made an effort to forget all about Victor Densham and succeeded for two days, when she met him in one of the lanes. He was riding, not the mare, but a steady-going cob, that seemed to know his master's mood. Olive looked at him and was more interested than ever. There was a history in the man's face; some sorrow or calamity, or perchance sin, had traced its tale in lines there. Whatever the tale was, the man was brooding over it when Olive met him. Possibly he had chosen this quiet lane because he expected to be alone there. He looked at her as he passed in a puzzled kind of way. He knew most of the people in the neighborhood by sight, and visitors were not frequent in Felstead. Olive accounted for his look in this way, and yet, at the same time, came the thought that there was a link between them, somewhere, somehow.

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She was so thoughtful when she got back to the farm that Robin noticed it.

"You look a bit troubled, lass."

"Do I?"

"Are you?"

"No; why should I be?"

Robin laughed and shook his head.

"Nay, that's too difficult a question for any mon to answer, where a woman's concerned."

"I'm ashamed of you, Robin," said his wife.

"There's no need for that, Jane. It's a compliment I'm paying the whole of your sex. There's so many things which trouble women which never trouble men at all, that it shows how much more thoughtful women are, and that's a sign of superiority, maybe."

Mrs. Mackenzie nodded her approval.

"It's the hens that always get into the garden," said Robin. "The cocks don't trouble about it."

Mrs. Mackenzie looked rather doubtful.

"Of course there are people who don't look upon such things as showing superiority, but then——"

"There's always the wise and the foolish," said his wife gravely.

"That is so, Jane. That's evident. The difficulty is to tell which is which."

And Robin laughed long and loudly at his excellent joke.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BEGINNING OF TEMPTATION

VICTOR DENSHAM was puzzled. He could not get the girl in the blue gown out of his head. He knew she did not belong to the village, yet her face was familiar.

"I wonder where I have seen her before?" He sat at the open window of a room which was a regular bachelor's apartment. There was nothing feminine in it. It bore not the slightest trace of any woman's touch. How could it? Mrs. Elliott had strict instructions not to meddle with it, and Parker, who kept it in some kind of order, was careful to do it in the most masculine way possible.

"I don't know why that girl in blue should trouble me," said Victor, watching a cloud of blue smoke from his cigar slide out of the window. "I've seen lots of girls in blue frocks and—but they were not such girls as this one. Where have I seen her? After all, what does it matter to me?"

A very excellent conclusion; but it did not put an end to his train of thought.

Parker came in with a cup of coffee.

"By the way, Parker, do you happen to have seen a—a young lady in a blue frock about here lately?" he asked carelessly, dropping a lump of sugar into his cup.

"No, sir."

"A stranger, I think, to Felstead?"

"I can't say I have noticed a blue frock, sir. Can you describe the lady? It is just possible she does not always wear blue."

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Victor thought that she always ought to, it suited her so admirably.

"Describe her," he said; "that is difficult. I am not equal to the task. It was the frock I noticed chiefly. It is of no consequence."

"No, sir."

But Parker did not go.

"That's all," said Densham.

"Yes, sir. Might I have a word with you?"

Victor started. Parker's requests to have a word with him generally meant that there was trouble in the house.

"It has not reference to the mistress, sir, except very indirectly. I saw the mistress an hour ago, sir, and she was very quiet. I understand Miss Lester thinks she is making progress."

Miss Lester was the nurse.

Victor nodded.

"You may remember, sir, that I spoke to you some time ago about Emily. It was in Jermyn Street."

"Emily?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. The name came so unfamiliarly to me at first that I have been compelled to practice it. It slipped out now, sir—I should have said Mrs. Elliott."

"Mrs. Elliott—yes, I do remember. You were thinking of marrying Mrs. Elliott?"

"Just so, sir. I was contemplating it then; in fact, I think I said it might be considered settled."

"So you are going to be married?"

"Yes, sir, with your sanction. I do not think you will find it inconvenience you in any way, sir, except perhaps for the few days we are away. Mrs. Elliott has a married sister in London, and we should be married from her house."

"When do you wish to go, Parker?"

"I thought, sir, in a month's time; and then if you could spare us for a week or ten days we should be very much obliged."

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"Certainly, Parker. I'm sure I wish you every happiness."

"Thank you, sir."

"I shall have to think about a wedding present," said Densham. "Perhaps, as you are not setting up a house, a check would be most acceptable."

"I can assure you, sir, such an idea never entered my head."

"It's usual to receive presents on these occasions, Parker."

"It is very good of you, sir. I am very grateful. Then I will make arrangements with Em—with Mrs. Elliott. No doubt she will speak to you herself, sir," and Parker left the room.

Going to be married! Parker's conversation started Densham on a new train of thoughts. What a world of hope there was in the reflection, going to be married! What a vista of pleasant scenes and happy hours! To most men it meant a real tangible future, a real life in which any little sacrifices which might have to be made would be amply repaid by the good won in it. It meant a home. Involuntarily Victor Densham glanced round his room. At that moment it seemed to lack many things. There was an easy chair by the window, close to his own—was it the effects of the fast deepening twilight that a figure seemed to be seated there, a woman's figure bending over her work? It was an indefinite outline, not to be recognized or given a name, but it was not the figure of the woman upstairs. The smoke from his cigar accounted for the blue haze which surrounded the figure, but it brought back the memory of the blue gown and the wearer of it.

He rose abruptly from his chair.

"I must not allow these fancies to get a hold upon me," he said. "That way lies madness. I have come so far on the journey, there shall be no turning back now. I wonder if I am doing all that can be done. I wonder if there is any device by which I can help her, any way in which she could be brought to think

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well of me. I believe, even now, our lives might be patched up and made decently happy if one could only find the way. Men can mend valuable china so that the breakage is difficult to find—why cannot lives be mended? It was not all hideous passion that I felt for Kate—there was something better in it than that. I believe we could turn the better part of it into happiness if she would only help me. I wonder if she will see me to-night."

He crossed the hall, and was at the foot of the stairs when the nurse came down.

"Good evening, nurse. How is the patient?"

"I think she improves."

"Do you think she will see me?"

"She possibly would, but I think it would be a great deal better if you did not go to her. Last time she was much worse afterwards."

"A strange infatuation of hers, nurse."

"Yes."

"Is there anything I can do, nurse—any course of action I can take, to prove how really I am her best friend? She may have said something, hinted something, that would enable you to give me advice."

"The only advice I can give is that you should not attempt to see her for the present. I honestly think she will get better, and conquer her—her disease."

Densham took his hat and went through his room into the garden.

It was a terrible life he felt himself compelled to live in this dismal house. For a long time his wife had given up all semblance of caring for him. She accused him of ruining her whole life; and if, as sometimes happened, she felt it necessary to excuse her intemperance, she did so by laying it at her husband's door. Some escape from her awful existence she must have, and she found that escape in drink. For days together she was perfectly quiet, reading and working in her rooms or walking in the garden, in a secluded part where Victor never went. These quiet days were followed by days of frenzy, when she had

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to be carefully watched. But, no matter what her mood, she steadily refused to have anything to do with her husband. She did not wish to see him, but she consented to do so at times, and then upbraided him for coming to look upon the wreck he himself had made. Time after time Victor had endeavored to persuade her to the contrary. He had drawn upon his imagination to show how pleasant their lives would be when she got thoroughly well again. He had been tender to her, he had been stern. He had tried to laugh her out of her fancies, he had pleaded with her until he had found it hard to keep his tears back. And he had done everything in vain. The truth was, the drink mania was upon her, perhaps an hereditary curse springing up again with tenfold force. She was incapable of looking at things justly. She could only see herself a prisoner in this hateful house, kept there by her brute of a husband.

Victor Densham was obliged to confess that his attempt to right the wrong had proved a dismal failure.

"Yet surely I only did what I ought to do," he argued to himself. "Surely I did what was right."

He never spoke of his wife. No one in the village ever saw her. He had never intended to keep his marriage secret. He had arranged everything so that he could take Kate to Felstead and introduce her as his wife to all who cared to know them. She was a woman who could easily have learned to hold her own, and how should anyone know anything about her life before her marriage? He had tried to be a just man, and he could not help being a proud one. When he saw what his wife was like she practically became a prisoner at the Hall, not only for his sake, but for her own. He could not let his neighbors see her and pity him; far better that they should be altogether ignorant of her existence. He could not let her go out alone, for he could not tell what she would do; and she absolutely refused to go out with anybody except in the garden.

Twice during the week he met the girl in the blue

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frock. Twice their eyes met. He puzzled his brain to remember where he had seen her before. She wondered what the history was that was traced so plainly on his face.

To Olive this wonder was the only little discord in the week's happiness. She could not get away from the thought that his life and hers were in some fashion linked together, that their paths were destined to cross; and there was an unpleasant sensation with the thought, as though the crossing must end in disaster for one or both of them. Robin Mackenzie, once or twice noticing the shadow on her face, could not readily be persuaded that she was enjoying herself.

"Ye're finding us a little dull, lass," he said on the Saturday night.

"I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life," she answered.

"Then ye'll have a trouble somewhere, for I see it peeping out of your eyes."

"It's the color of my eyes that deceive you, Mr. Mackenzie, perhaps."

He shook his head.

"How persistent you are, Robin," said his wife. "Most people have got a sad spot somewhere, and they can't always be hiding it. Smoke your pipe, and don't trouble the child."

"It's not inquisitiveness, Jane," laughed her husband; "but I've been thinking perhaps we haven't been giving the lass enough to eat, and she'll go home and tell her friends she's been near starved."

"Mr. Mackenzie, did you see the pot of jam at tea?" asked Olive. "Well, it was only opened yesterday, and I don't believe it will last to-morrow. I have been rather greedy with that jam, and perhaps that was the trouble peeping at you out of my eyes."

Robin laughed, and hoped that at any rate it wouldn't prevent her singing to-morrow.

Around Felstead Robin Mackenzie was a considerable man. People spoke of him in this way, and

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had a suspicion that he was growing rich, which, as a matter of fact, was not the case. But he was big and hearty, tolerably successful, and was a thorough man of business. The cordial greetings he received on his way to church showed Olive how thoroughly respected he was, although he declared that the reason they took such a lot of notice of him this morning was because he happened to have Olive with him—a remark which made Mrs. Mackenzie more ashamed of him than ever—especially on his way to church, too. They were entering the churchyard just then, and Robin grew very red in the face in his endeavors to suppress a laugh.

It was an old church on which Time had laid loving fingers, mantling its tower with ivy, touching its roof with moss and yellow lichen, scattering wild flowers in profusion at the foot of its walls, and mellowing its bells into sweet music. The whole village seemed to go to church—master and man, mistress and maid. There were coats so sleek and black that one could almost read "Sunday" on them, and bonnets so carefully trimmed that "For Sunday wear only" was apparent in their ingenuity. And there were dresses of a fashion unknown to town—a blending of colors which such novices as have their marts in Regent Street would never dare to attempt; and there were honest males with plenty of muscle who admired them, too. The simplicity of Olive's dress made her somewhat conspicuous, and it is very doubtful if the plain white gown was half so pleasing to the aforementioned muscular males as Sarah Benson's confection in two shades of green with a dash of pink. But then Sarah Benson was the acknowledged belle of Felstead. Still Olive caused a mild sensation. She was a stranger for one thing, and she sat beside Robin Mackenzie for another. Those who were ever ready to welcome a touch of humor in the morning service were wondering what sort of expression her face would assume when her companion began to sing. Olive had prepared herself for the worst, and the

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reality was not so bad as she anticipated. True, Robin sang lustily, and with a very hazy idea of the tune; but his whole soul was in the singing—hand in hand with his lungs, so to speak—and since she was beside him to steer him through the intricacies of the melody, he was more in harmony with the choir than usual. The humorously inclined found little food for merriment.

It may have been Robin Mackenzie's singing which caused the occupant of an old square pew in the north aisle to look in his direction, but it was not Robin Mackenzie upon whom his eye rested. He moved slightly to right or left several times when some bonnet obstructed his view of the girl by Mackenzie's side, and it is extremely doubtful if he carried much of the Vicar's three quarters of an hour's sermon away with him. He carefully chose a corner of the pew from which he could obtain the most uninterrupted view of Olive, and he was more puzzled about her than ever. Where had he seen her before? During the sermon he determined to overtake Mackenzie on the road home, but outside the church he changed his mind.

"It is playing with fire," he said to himself. "My good determinations are not strong enough to be tampered with. I'm a poor weak fool." And with this reflection he vaulted a stile and went home by the fields.

Had he known how much Olive was hoping he would catch them up, the temptation would probably have been too strong for him. Olive was conscious that he had watched her during the greater part of the service, although she had not once looked directly at him.

"Possibly he has seen me at the Forum," she thought, "and is wondering why my face is familiar; or perhaps—no, he does not look like that kind of man."

So she raised him above the level of other men who looked at her only because she happened to be pretty.

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She was so deep in her conjectures concerning Victor Densham that Robin's question of how she liked their church quite startled her.

"Very much indeed," she said.

"It's got a history, but I don't remember what it is."

"Something to do with Charles the First," Mrs. Mackenzie remarked.

"Aye, so it was. History is not a strong point of mine; but if Charles the First went everywhere they say he did, he must have had a restless sort of existence."

"He did, Robin; he's the one that lost his head, you know," said his wife, with a touch of pride in her tone at her superior knowledge.

"I know that, Jane; but I'm speaking of the time before that happened, when he was forever hiding in chimneys and climbing trees."

"I think that was Charles the Second," said Olive.

"Was it? Well, if he's the one who gave our church its history, the less said about it the better. Ye sing very nicely, lass."

"Thank you."

"I expect we made the choir a bit jealous."

"Robin, you don't go to church to make the choir jealous."

"That's true, Jane; but I shouldna' mind them feeling what a deal they lost when they asked me to sit in the aisle. I thought the Squire would have passed us. Aye, there he goes. He's gone by the fields. You were rather interested in Mr. Densham, lass."

"Was I? Oh, yes; I overheard him talking to you, didn't I?"

"I like him," said Robin.

"You're peculiar," said his wife; "most folks don't."

"Don't you like him, Mrs. Mackenzie?" asked Olive.

"I neither do nor don't. If all they say about him is true, I'm sure I shouldn't; but as more than half

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they say is probably false, I'm inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"And if you're any wiser now as to whether she likes him or not, you're clever," said Robin; and he laughed aloud, as he pulled his wife's arm through his, as compensation for making fun of her.

Victor Densham went home to his lonely room and his solitary dinner. The windows were wide open, the sunshine was on the lawn without, and there was music in the trees—a peaceful day. The peacefulness only made him feel more lonely, more restless. Was this life to last forever?

He strolled across the lawn and into the woods which bordered it. He chose his path deliberately, until he stood on the edge of the high ground which looked across the fields toward Mackenzie's farm.

"So she lives there. A relation of his, I suppose. That is where I have seen her before, perhaps. I thought it was the blue frock I had chiefly noticed," he mused; "it was not—it was her face; and something behind her face—her soul. There's some lucky devil in the world somewhere, perhaps as yet unconscious of his luck."

He leaned against a tree trunk smoking. Once he thought he caught sight of a white figure in Mackenzie's garden, but it vanished among the trees.

"What a fool I am—worse than a fool. If I am going to give way to this kind of thing, I had far better be in Jermyn Street for a time."

And he went back to the house.

CHAPTER XIV

EVEN DEVILS HAVE ONE REAL PLEASURE

NEXT morning Densham informed Parker that he intended going to town for a few days.

"When do you go, sir?"

There was no reason in the world why he should not go that day—the previous evening he had intended to go that day; now Parker's question came as a respite, and he seized it.

"Wednesday or Thursday probably."

"Yes, sir," and Parker withdrew.

The question seemed to have given Densham an excuse for not going at once, an opportunity to believe that it was not possible to get away until the time stated, and starting from this false premise, he argued the matter out to his own satisfaction, as many do every day, causing immense merriment doubtless among the devils who designed this false logic for the fall of man. They know how easy a victim is he who, knowing a temptation, carefully walks into it, armed only with his own arguments. Even devils have one real pleasure—the contemplation of a fool.

Victor Densham crossed the lawn and took a path through the woods which led across the fields to the lane where he had met the girl in the blue frock. He wanted to meet her, to see her, that was all. There could be nothing more. It was surely a very small thing to desire, very harmless, because he could so easily have found an excuse to go to Mackenzie's farm, and in all probability get an introduction to the girl. He was not attempting to do that, and he felt almost happy in his exceeding virtue.

But those devils who have the making and the

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mending of the logical net are not such fools as stupid men seem to suppose. They do not allow any little accident to mar their success. Having spread the net, they take means to drive the fish into it, and what we may call an unlucky chance is no chance at all, but design. We are the fools, and we do not often call the chance unlucky. We are more likely to think it providential—a thing that was destined to be; and presently, when repentance comes, find an excuse for ourselves in this thought.

Victor Densham did not think the chance unlucky when at a turn in the lane he was startled by a cry, and the next moment something blue seemed to fall through a gap in the hedge, and alight not too gracefully in the ditch by the roadside.

He hurried forward and held out his hand to help her.

“I am afraid you are hurt.”

“No, frightened, that’s all,” she answered, scrambling out of the ditch, which was fortunately dry.

“What frightened you? Allow me,” and he bent down to brush the dust from her skirt.

“That,” she answered.

Densham looked up, and there, regarding them over the fence which filled up the gap in the hedge, was a young bull.

“I suppose I ought not to have gone into the field, but the walk beside the woods there looked so tempting. I shall keep to the road for the future.”

“The beast may be harmless,” said Densham.

“He may be, but I prefer him the other side of the fence. Besides, he has made me look very foolish, which I strongly object to.”

“I assure you, you do not look foolish.”

“It is very kind of you to say so, but I don’t see how a woman falling over a fence into a ditch can look anything else.”

“For my part I have a kindly feeling toward the animal,” said Densham. “He gave me the opportunity of coming to your assistance.”

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"The satisfaction in that must be very great," she returned, laughing.

"Greater than you can imagine, because I have been troubling about you."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Since I met you in this very lane the other day, I have been wondering where we have met before."

"We have never met before."

"I think you are mistaken. I even fancied that you half recognized me."

"That is easily explained," she said. "I had heard of you, Mr. Densham."

"From Robin Mackenzie. Well, I trust he said nothing very bad about me?"

"No; but as a matter of fact I had heard of you before I ever saw Mr. Mackenzie, before I came to Felstead."

Densham looked at her questioningly, and she laughed, a merry laugh, that pleased him.

"You would hardly laugh like that if it had been anything very bad that you had heard of me," he said.

"You seem desperately afraid that people will speak ill of you. Is it a case of conscience making cowardly?"

"Hardly so bad as that, Miss—" He paused.

"I am not to be trapped," she said.

"Presently, perhaps, you will solve the mystery," he laughed. "Conscience hardly makes me afraid, but the fact is that I have not been a very good landlord—have spent most of my time in London, you know, and I believe village gossip imputes all sorts of crimes to me on that account. You know, in a village everybody knows so much more about you than you do about yourself."

"It was in London that I first heard of you."

"Was it in connection with anything desperately wicked?"

"No."

"I am glad of that. I shouldn't like you to have a bad opinion of me. Somehow—very foolish, of

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course—I seemed to recognize an old friend in you—at least one who would be friendly; and my friends are not legion.”

“That is strange, isn’t it? It is not usually difficult for a rich man to have friends.”

“Oh, I don’t buy mine. I want those who would still be my friends if my money were swept away to-morrow.”

“They are difficult to find,” she answered.

“So you will not tell me what it was you heard about me?”

“Not now.”

“Nor who you are?”

“It is of no consequence.”

They had reached the top of the lane, and were in sight of Mackenzie’s farm.

“I shall see you again?”

“Perhaps; I don’t know.”

“That means yes. To-morrow. No; you must not go without some promise.”

She looked at him quickly, almost defiantly.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “I have no right to ask it.”

“Perhaps to-morrow,” she returned. “I cannot stay in the house all day, can I?”

He raised his hat and stood there until she was half across the field on her way to the farm. She did not look back as he half hoped she might. Then he went slowly home.

“I will go to town on Wednesday,” he said. “If she comes to-morrow, I must be there to meet her. After that, better for me to go—better for her too, perhaps.”

The Hall looked darker and drearier than ever as he crossed the lawn to his own room.

But the next morning everything looked bright again to Victor Densham. He did not attempt to hide the reason. He was to see her again. It was to be the last time, but it was in the future just now. There was the excitement of anticipation. Time enough to

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regret when the day was over, when the future had become the past. And lest she should be a creature of whims and should go to the lane early, so that she might keep her promise and yet not see him, he went early. She should not cheat him in that way. And for his pains he had nearly two hours to wait.

She came slowly and thoughtfully along the lane, dressed just as she was yesterday, except that a rose was tucked in her waistband, and from the gap in the hedge where the bull had frightened her he watched her coming—watched her enchanted under the spell of her beauty and her personality. She was a woman who might be won, were he free to win her.

"I must go to town to-morrow," he thought, as he stepped into the road, and those logical devils chuckled more than ever.

She looked up with a smile of welcome and gave him her hand.

"I thought perhaps you would not come," she said.

"I have been waiting two hours," he answered.

"Two hours!"

"Yes; in case I should miss you. What made you think I should not come?"

"I was rather angry with myself after I left you," she said. "By not telling you who I was, and making a little mystery of myself, it really seemed as if it were only an excuse to see you again. Please believe me when I say that I never looked at it in that light until afterwards."

"Such a thing never entered my head," Densham answered. "I based all my expectations on the fact that you could not remain in the house all day."

"My name is Olive Vaughan," she went on. "Does that tell you why you thought you recognized me?"

"Olive Vaughan!" he repeated. "Ah, yes, I remember. I saw you only once to my knowledge."

"At the Forum, the night you helped a cripple to get into the place to see me."

"I remember perfectly."

"He came to see you next day. I dare say you

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recollect what he told you about me, and something at least of what you said to him. It was from Zett that I first heard of you."

"I gave him some encouragement. I felt convinced, I knew——"

"Yes; he told me," she answered. "I wanted a holiday before beginning the rehearsals of a new piece, and answered an advertisement. So I came to Mrs. Mackenzie's, and you can imagine that I was rather interested when I heard that Mr. Densham lived at Felstead."

"I am afraid Zett spoke too well of me."

"I don't know; he said what he thought. Now, Mr. Densham, I will go home."

"Why?"

"Chiefly because I want to."

"And for other reasons. I understand. You are still angry with yourself."

"Perhaps; it is hardly worth discussing. I should be glad if you would not repeat what I have told you. Of course the Mackenzies know me as Miss Vaughan, but they might not think so much of me if they knew I were a music-hall artiste."

"Why not?"

"That is a man's regular argument, and you know it is a foolish one."

"No, Miss Vaughan, I do not. Of course I should not say anything to Mackenzie, but I am rather thinking of myself. Why should you refuse my friendship, if indeed it is not too early days to offer it?"

"Because——"

"Exactly. I quite understand," Densham returned.

"But is that quite fair to me?"

"How can it be unfair?"

"It puts a kind of black mark against my character. To put it brutally, I am a dangerous person simply because you are a music-hall singer. I maintain that I am not an undesirable acquaintance because you are a lady."

He meant it. At that moment he believed himself

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a harmless acquaintance. He felt a sense of protection over her. He felt that for her there might be pleasure in his companionship. And if he in the process of friendship should learn to love, that was his misfortune. The love should never be spoken. How those logical devils laughed!

"Chance has made us acquainted," he went on. "Circumstances have in a curious way fashioned a link between us. Why should you refuse to know me? If my company is not distasteful to you, why should we not walk along a country road together? For the life of me, I can see no harm!"

"No, Mr. Densham, I do not say there is any real harm, but——"

"But you are afraid of me."

"Not a bit," she laughed. "Nor of any other man either. The truth is I am not very fond of men at any time, and I have no women friends. Now if only you were a woman."

"It is my misfortune, Miss Vaughan, that I am not, under the circumstances."

"We are both talking rather foolishly now, aren't we?"

She turned toward the top of the lane, toward the farm.

"You are determined, then, to have nothing more to do with me?"

"It is best. Under all circumstances I think it will be best."

They walked on in silence—he racking his brain for a convincing argument, she half hoping to hear such an argument. The net was breaking. To-morrow Victor Densham would certainly go to London unless those logical devils mended the breaking meshes quickly.

Suddenly Robin Mackenzie turned into the lane.

"Well, lass. Good morning, Squire."

The net was mended.

"Good morning, Mackenzie. I had the privilege of helping Miss Vaughan out of the ditch yesterday."

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"So she told me." And Mackenzie laughed loudly, partly at that circumstance, partly because he had caught them together to-day.

"And curiously Miss Vaughan and I know something of each other. It's a very small world, Mackenzie."

"Very like, Squire; but it's quite big enough for most of us. Will you walk across to the farm and taste our new brew? Jane says it's the best she ever had, but then she says that every time. And there's a calf I'd like you to look at. Business and pleasure, sir; but as it's a warm morning, I say pleasure first for once. First the beer, then the calf."

So they crossed the fields together.

Whatever Mrs. Mackenzie thought of Victor Densham in her own heart she made him exceedingly welcome, and she was not unconscious of Olive Vaughan's heightened color. Although in no way a matchmaker or a gossip lover, she was as keen as most people to recognize which way the wind blew, and she knew perfectly well that the girl was the attraction which brought the Squire to the farm. Of Olive's station in life she knew nothing, so she had no grounds for deciding whether the acquaintance was a good one or not. With just one sharp look at her husband, she busied herself with the jug and glasses.

"That's very fine, Mackenzie," said Densham. Had it been vinegar, he would have said the same.

"Aye, it wants some beating, I say, Squire."

"And if it had not been for the bull, Miss Vaughan, I should probably never have tasted it," said Densham.

"Why, you had only got to walk in here any day, I am sure," said Mrs. Mackenzie.

Olive smiled, but Densham was not to be beaten.

"Without an invitation, Mrs. Mackenzie! How could I? No; I put my good fortune down to the bull."

"Then come and see that calf I was speaking of,"

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said Robin. "If you like her and want her, I'll bless that bull too."

Densham followed the farmer, taking particular care to leave his stick behind him, and giving a petitioning look at Olive to ensure her being present when he returned.

Olive went into the garden. She was afraid that Mrs. Mackenzie might ask her awkward questions, and she wanted a few moments by herself to think in. It seemed a fatality that had made her acquainted with Victor Densham. He too was conscious of a link between them, just as she had been. She could not help knowing that he was interested in her as she was in him. He was different from other men. Already he seemed to exert a sort of mastery over her. There was something to be remembered in his most casual words. She had made an effort to put an end to their acquaintance and had failed, by as pure a chance, surely, as could possibly have happened. Were they not destined to be friends? Why should she fight against it any more?

In the garden Densham found her when he returned with Robin Mackenzie. He went into the house to get his stick and say good morning to Mrs. Mackenzie. Then he joined Olive.

"I am glad you did not run away, Miss Vaughan. I thought you would."

"That would hardly have been polite."

"After what you said this morning, I did not expect that consideration would weigh with you."

"I spoke very sensibly this morning," she answered.

"I do not think so. That is a very rude remark, isn't it; but upon my word it is true. Won't you let me see you again?"

"Will it do you so much good?"

"I shall look forward to it. I dare say no more than that."

She got up and walked with him toward the gate. The rose fell from her waistband. Densham picked it up.

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"Shall I be disappointed?" he asked. "Shall I look forward in vain? You know you cannot stay in the house all day in such beautiful weather as this."

"Perhaps we may meet," she answered, holding out her hand for the rose.

"I shall keep this in case we do not. At least I will have something to remember two pleasant meetings by."

"It was never much of a rose, and it is faded now. See, the petals are falling."

Densham put it carefully in his pocket.

"I shall wait and hope," he said, as he opened the garden gate.

"You might want to taste Mr. Mackenzie's ale again."

"That is the kindest thing you have said to me. Good-by."

He held her hand, half raised it to his lips, and then released it.

"Good-by," he said.

From the road he looked back and took off his hat. Olive was still standing at the gate.

Those logical devils grinned and scampered over one another in the excess of their merriment.

CHAPTER XV

SAY YOU LOVE ME

THE unsuspecting Parker packed his master's portmanteau and had to unpack it again. Victor Densham had changed his mind. He could admit no reason why he should go to town just now. The country was at its best. It would be folly to go and stew in those stuffy rooms in Jermyn Street.

Robin Mackenzie had a new joke to laugh at.

"All through a bull," he said one day. The remark apparently was apropos of nothing, but he laughed almost to choking, and found the humor so excellent that he repeated it every day, but only before his wife. He did not let Olive hear him say it.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at," said Mrs. Mackenzie.

"Did ye see the lass go out this morning?"

"Yes; she goes out every morning."

"Did ye see her pick a rose and stick it in her belt?"

"The child's welcome, surely."

"I met that rose later, and it was in the Squire's coat."

"Robin, I'm ashamed of you."

"I tell you, Jane, it's going to be a case. That bull's been the means of putting more color into the lass's cheeks than ever the country air has, and he'll be putting a ring on her finger before she's much older."

"And will that be such a good thing?" said Mrs. Mackenzie.

"For the Squire, do you mean?"

"I mean for the lass."

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"He's got a good many thousands a year, I should say."

"I wasn't thinking of money."

"You've been taking heed of village gossip. Why, gossip says I'm wealthy. See how it lies about me."

Mrs. Mackenzie shook her head.

"There's been many things said about Mr. Denham that I should want clearing up a bit before ever he married a daughter of mine."

"I don't believe there's anything against him," said Mackenzie. "I should have been in the way of hearing of it if there were."

"I've heard of a woman in London," said Mrs. Mackenzie.

"I've heard of a good many," laughed Robin, "and seen them too, and very enjoyable it was."

"I've heard that there's a woman up at the Hall, kept under lock and key," whispered Mrs. Mackenzie.

"That's a good joke. Who told you that, Jane?"

"Mrs. Benson says she's seen her."

"That's a better joke still. Why, nobody ever believes what Mrs. Benson says. You know that. When she told you Cabey's wife had got twins last summer you wouldn't believe it until you'd been up to see them."

"Well, she spoke the truth then, Robin."

"By mistake, perhaps. If Mrs. Benson gives anyone a bad character, it's a certainty that they are as good as can be. It's made me quite uncomfortable with regard to my religious matters ever since I heard she'd said a good word about me. It's true I found some consolation when Cabey told me she'd informed a select few that I drank."

"I wish I'd heard her say it," said Mrs. Mackenzie. "Still, Robin, I've a mind to speak to the child."

"Jane, I've had sax lang years more experience of this world than you, and let me tell you it's mighty queer work meddling with other folks' affairs. Let them gang their own gait, and ye'll find there's a right ending nine times out of ten. She's a good lass, and

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if there's anything wrong with him she'll find it out."

"Perhaps you are right."

"You wait sax more years, Jane, and ye'll have come to my experience."

So Olive received no warning against Victor Densham, and met him every day by accident. She really believed it was by accident, for she did not always go to the lane, but at the same time she would have been bitterly disappointed if she had not seen him. Victor did not think it necessary to tell her that he watched from his coign of vantage in the wood to see which way she went.

Lookers-on invariably see the most of the game—often, perhaps, a little more than there is to be seen. It is quite certain that Robin and his wife came to the conclusion that she was in love with Squire Densham long before she recognized the fact herself. Love, so far as Olive knew anything of it, was not a thing to be desired. Her father had spoken of love, and she understood what the word meant in his mind. Men who knew nothing about her except that she looked well behind the footlights of the Forum, had spoken to her of love, sometimes with the dew of wine still moist upon their lips; she could accurately value their meaning. Women with whom she was forced to associate in the duties of her profession spoke of love, and its worth was measured by the diamonds it gave them, and the suppers, the race meetings, the up-river parties it invited them to. Even Edward Overton's declaration of love had a false ring in it. He might not have intended it so, but Olive knew that it repelled her. That she could not return his affection caused her no sorrow, did not make her pity him, because she felt that he had no need of it. Any other woman who was pretty enough to take his fancy would do just as well for him. Her refusal had not hurt him in the least. She felt herself superior to all these. To have married any man she had yet known would have been to step down to him, to do him a

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favor. The past, position, parentage, did not enter into the question at all. It was simply what she herself was, what they were. With Victor Densham she was conscious of quite an opposite feeling. Here was a man who was at least her equal—a man who did not seek her out because she happened to be what the world called beautiful—a man who respected her. She was happy in his society, glad to know that he liked to be with her. Was she in love with him? She asked herself the question often, and she could not answer it. Only her first waking thought was that she would see him again to-day, and her last thoughts at night a remembrance of all he had said to her. Was this real love? Could she go back to work and forget? Could she take up her everyday life again just as she had left it, without one regret if Victor Densham were to pass out of her existence altogether? She shook her head thoughtfully and a little sadly, too; for somehow her past, her position, her parentage would intrude themselves now. Could a man like Victor Densham think of such a woman as she was? He might love Olive Vaughan; but Clara Farrow, the daughter of the wax modeler and miserable money-lender, the child of such sordid surroundings as had been hers!

“I could not look at him and tell him the truth of all that horrible time,” she said to herself. “He might pity me, but he could not love me.”

It is not impossible that even as she said it, Victor Densham asked himself a somewhat similar question.

“What would she say to me if I told her all? I almost did yesterday, but I was afraid. She would go away from me as certain as this cigar ash falls to the ground. She would hate me, despise me; and to see hate in her eyes would—no, it wouldn't kill me—such things do not kill men; but it would drive me to the devil.”

He was standing in the woods watching for Olive. The journey to London had been indefinitely postponed now. Except at odd moments of depression, or

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when twilight gathered and the woods and the fields were still, he forgot to take himself to task for what he was doing. The days slipped by pleasantly. His life had never held more in it than it did now. He dare not think of the woman upstairs—all his thoughts were for the woman who was his companion day after day.

“Heaven help me, I love her,” he said, “and must not tell her so—dare not even tell her why I may not love her.”

And side by side with the treacherous part he was playing, he struggled to do his duty to his wife. Twice lately she had seen him. He had endeavored to win her respect, to recall what they had once been to each other, had spoken of the happiness which might yet be theirs if she would only treat him differently.

“This is my prison. You and your servants are my jailers. I hate you and them.”

This was the answer which drove him away to happiness in the neighboring lanes. He was very mortal, and he excused himself. There were times when he accused his conscience of having given him false advice. He ought never to have married Kate. He was not bound to do so. Few other men would have done so. Why should conscience have bound upon him such a burden! These were his rebellious moods, which had come more frequently since he had known Olive. It was after one of them that he met her in the evening, close to Mackenzie’s farm. He had seen her earlier in the day, and he did not expect to see her then; but the Hall had grown too dreary—he was obliged to go out—obliged to get away from himself. What more natural than that he should walk toward Mackenzie’s farm!

“Olive!”

It was the first time he had called her by her name.

“You startled me,” she said.

“And you—no, I must not tell you. You are not going in.”

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"I must."

"Not yet," he said. "If you only knew how different everything looks to me now you are here, you would not go—not yet. See, it is nearly full moon. It is early. This is the best part of the day. Come a little way."

"They will be coming to look for me."

"Let them. They shall find you with me."

"I am not quite sure that I want them to do that."

"But I want you. They have each other, and I am alone. I came out because I was miserable. I came——"

"Were you coming to the farm?"

"Not to the house; but I came this way because—because my little companion was here."

"You were depressed this morning, and you promised you would not be for the rest of the day."

"It was easy to promise when we were together; I broke my promise almost directly you had gone. Come a little way and I will renew it."

"And break it again."

"Perhaps the promise will be more binding to-night. Come."

A farmer's boy came whistling up the road, swinging his empty dinner basin in its red cotton handkerchief. It may have been his coming which decided Olive. She walked beside Victor away from the house.

"Tell me why you are so depressed," she said presently.

"I think you make me so."

"I do?"

"I'm a lonely man, and until now I haven't minded so very much; but since you came, since you have given me so many pleasant hours, my old life seems to have slipped away from me, out of my grasp. A new measure of time has come to me, from our last meeting to our next."

"But that is foolish. You should employ yourself. A lazy man quickly falls into mischief."

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She tried to speak quite carelessly.

"I suppose you are right, Olive. Do you mind my calling you Olive?"

"Not very much."

"Do you at all?"

"Perhaps I do a little," she answered.

"I am sorry—forgive me. I think of you as Olive, and it seems so natural to call you so."

They walked on in silence for a little while, and turned into the lane where they had first met.

There was the trunk of a tree which had fallen years ago lying across the grass by the roadside.

"Let us sit down for a few minutes," said Victor suddenly. "You must not go away just yet. I have something to say to you."

She took out her watch, and held it for the moonlight to fall upon it.

"Is it so hard to be with me for a little while?"

"No; but it is getting late."

Her hand trembled as she held the watch.

"Only nine o'clock," he said. "Listen!"

He did not speak until the nine strokes from the clock in Felstead church tower had melted across the meadows into silence.

"Olive—I must call you so to-night—to-morrow I will ask your permission—Olive, have you been happy here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She laughed a little nervously.

"I love the country and the Mackenzies."

"I know, but is there no other reason?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "I have enjoyed being with you."

"Olive!"

His hand rested on her arm. For one moment he struggled to hold back his words as a man may for a moment struggle against a crowd only to be pushed down and trampled on. Then he fell on his knees beside her, and her hands were in his.

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"Olive, I love you. Oh, my dear, you cannot know how I love you. I cannot tell you. I have no words; but I love you, I love you."

A little sob escaped her.

"Olive, my darling, can you love me? I want it all—your whole heart and soul. Speak to me, my little girl. You are mine. Olive, tell me you love me."

His arm stole slowly round her, and her bent head touched his shoulder.

"Tell me, little one," he said. Her hair touched his lips. "Tell me, Olive."

"Yes, Victor, I do love you."

She looked up suddenly, the moonlight turning to pearls, the tears standing in her eyes.

"Thank God!" he murmured, as their lips met in one long kiss, the first Olive had ever known. "Thank God!" he said, and never thought how great his mockery. He had forgotten the other woman—his wife.

"I must go, Victor."

"I can let you go now."

"And you will not be depressed?"

"Not to-night."

They walked back almost in silence, a word of endearment only at intervals. For a moment Victor remembered, but thrust the memory aside. Clara Farrow, almost forgotten, flashed across Olive's mental vision, and she shut her eyes to blot out the past, if only for to-night.

"Let me go alone from here."

She stopped suddenly, fifty yards from the farm gate.

"Good night," he said, kissing her. "Until to-morrow, dearest."

"Until to-morrow," she repeated.

"Say once more, I love you."

"I love you."

Then Victor released her; then he remembered his wife.

CHAPTER XVI

A LATE REPENTANCE

VICTOR DENSHAM went home slowly. Olive loved him, that was a sweet knowledge. Her kiss still trembled on his lips—surely enough to make a lover happy. Yet he went slowly, thoughtfully. Every step took him nearer to the Hall, nearer to his wife. He remembered her now; he had forgotten her while he was with Olive. For days he had been dallying with this temptation, and to-night he had fallen. And Olive! The whole heinousness of his offense burst upon him suddenly. Until now he had thought only of himself, his own burdens; the terrible wrong he was doing the woman he really loved had not occurred to him. She loved him! He had drawn from her the sweetest confession a woman can make. She loved him, and he was a scoundrel.

He looked back across the meadows toward the farm. Should he go back to her to-night?

“To-morrow I will tell her,” he said. “What will she say to me? My God, what will she say to me?”

As he entered his room, Parker brought in the spirit tantalus and a soda siphon.

“No; don’t close the windows, Parker. I will shut them when I go to bed.”

“It is warm to-night, sir.”

“Very. I shall want nothing more.”

Densham mixed himself some whisky and soda—a stiffer glass than was his wont—and drank it at a draught.

“What will she say to me?” he said, speaking aloud to himself. “She will hate me. She will never understand. She will pluck me out of her life en-

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tirely. She will think of me only as another vicious scoundrel whose chief pleasure in life is to deceive a woman. She will never believe that I love her, that I can love her as I do. She will hate me as much—no, a thousand times more—than she loves me now. A woman like Olive would. She would have no pity. I could never make her understand.”

The moon was behind the woods. It was dark in the garden. A moth flew into the room and circled round the lamp, clattering with its wings at the shade. Densham started up and began to pace the room.

“I am thinking only of myself; what of her? I love her, and love’s first duty is to protect. What have I done?”

He pressed his hands to his eyes to shut the horrible truth out.

“I have hurt her life. She loves me, believes in me, and as a woman will, she has made me a standard to judge by. I have touched her innocence with my unworthy love, and who can tell how it may hurt her in the time to come! Have I the courage to go to her to-morrow? Can I bear the look that will come into her beautiful eyes, the scorn that will settle in her face, the harsh words with which she will tell me to go? I cannot. I will write it. Perhaps she will keep what I write, and looking at it again some time, will know that I did love her with all the pure heart and soul that is in me.”

He sat down at his desk and began to write. He told her the whole truth from the night he first saw Kate. He told her of his marriage, and why he had married. He asked her forgiveness, and he told her that he loved her—that until he knew her he had never known real love—that for her sake he should never love again.

“Some day, my dearest, you may be happy in the love of a good man; perhaps, knowing your own happiness, you may spare one tender thought for a wretch who loved you so well that he forgot his honor. I

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have no excuse to offer you—there is no excuse; only, Olive, don't quite hate me."

The moth still circled round the lamp, and presently an unlucky flight across the flame singed its wings, and it fell with a dull thud which sounded loud in the stillness. In the act of sealing his letter Densham turned.

"Poor brute," he said, "you've come to the light and hurt yourself; so have I."

The moth fluttered across the table beating its marred wings. There was power and determination in the action.

"That's brave," said Densham, standing with the letter in his hand. "Braver than I am. I haven't the courage to stand face to face with the woman I have wronged and make confession. I am a miserable coward."

He watched the moth struggle. It was a large one, with brown wings marked with black and white. It struggled and half flew, half leaped toward the lamp, unconquered in its pain.

"I will go to her," Densham said, putting the letter in his pocket. "I will go to her and make confession. I have sinned; the least I can do is to take my punishment like a man. Come, little friend, you've taught me a lesson; I will lend you a helping hand."

He took the moth up carefully, and walking across the lawn, put it down at the edge of the wood.

"You're not much hurt," he said; "you'll be well by morning."

All night long Densham paced his room or sat in an armchair looking into vacancy. He would see Olive and tell her everything, but he did not destroy the letter. He meant to be brave, but he was conscious of being cowardly. To-morrow she would meet him, a color in her cheeks, love light in her eyes; she would come to him and wait to be kissed, and then—then he must tell her. Would she speak angry words to him, or would she turn in silence and leave him standing there? And afterwards! Into a long

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blank of years he looked, and saw only darkness and night.

"Perhaps some day I shall meet her, and she will pass me as though she had never known me."

He buried his face in his hands to shut out the thought. He turned out the lamp presently, for the first light of dawn crept slowly over the tree tops and across the garden. A breeze stirred the curtains at the window. He took a cigarette from the box on the table—he had not smoked all night—and he went on to the lawn to draw into his lungs the freshness of a new day.

"I will go to bed for an hour or two," he said.

He entered his room again and closed the window. He poured some water into a tumbler, for his throat was dry, and his hand trembled so that the jug rang against the glass as he did it. He did not remember when his nerves had got the upper hand of him before. He was angry at the sign of weakness, and with an effort drank the water steadily.

"I think I can understand how a criminal feels when he sees his last day dawn," he said to himself. "The day of my punishment has come, and I have no excuse to urge that I suffer unjustly. I thoroughly deserve it all. True, I have hurt myself; but how much more may I not have hurt the woman I love. Selfishness is at the bottom of my crime, as it is of most crimes; but, Heaven knows, I never saw it clearly until now."

He was tired out with his long night of thought and self-examination. Sleep came as soon as his head touched the pillow, deep sleep and dreamless, that held him until long after his usual hour of waking.

He met the nurse as he went downstairs, and inquired after his wife.

"She has had a restless night."

"So have I," answered Densham.

"She is sleeping quietly now, and if she will stay in bed it will be a good thing."

"Quite so, nurse. You expect a bad time again?"

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"I think it possible. On the whole, though, I am convinced that she is decidedly better than when I first came here. I think she may quite recover in time. Toward you she may change quite suddenly."

He smiled a little and left her. The nurse pitied him. He would be such a good husband, one in a thousand, she thought, if his wife would only let him.

It was nearly noon when Densham walked up the road to Mackenzie's farm. It was here he had parted with Olive last night, only last night—it seemed so long ago. He could see no one in the garden. Perhaps Olive had already gone out. Robin Mackenzie was in the yard.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Squire. I was just debating whether I should walk up to the Hall."

"You want to see me?"

"Well, it's like this; I do, and I don't. I do, because I'm a bit troubled; and I don't, because it's not exactly any business of mine."

"We shall not quarrel about that, Mackenzie; but you must give me half an hour's grace. I want to see Miss Vaughan first. May I go on to the house?"

"Miss Vaughan! She's gone."

"Which way did she go?"

"No, Squire, she's gone for good. I drove her to the station this morning before nine o'clock."

"Gone!" said Densham. "Why? She never told me she was going."

"It's about her I was coming to see you. It's hot standing here, Squire, and Jane's busy about the house. There's a seat under that clump of trees across the yard. Would you mind coming there?"

They walked in silence across the yard.

"Now tell me," said Densham, sitting down and taking off his hat.

"Were you with the lass last night?"

"I was. It was an accidental meeting. I had seen her during the day. We went for a little walk, and I left her at your gate."

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Mackenzie nodded his head.

"I've said it's no business of mine, but the lass just came into our home a stranger, and in a few hours she had crept into our hearts—into Jane's and mine. One would have to be pretty blind, Squire, not to see that you were struck with her too. Whether what you said about having known her before was true, or was a little judicious dust throwing, I don't know."

"It was essentially true."

"I thought it was; Jane didn't believe it, but then women are hard to convince, and Jane has prejudices."

"Against me?"

"Well, I've gone into this business, so I won't deny what's a fact. She's not over favorable toward you, Squire. But we'll come back again to that in a while. Last night the lass comes in with a color enough to make the prettiest flowers in the garden yonder die of jealousy. I smiled to myself, because I guessed what it meant. She was very silent, and she looked happy. Suddenly she turned to us and said she was obliged to go back to London—could I drive her to catch the earliest train. We didn't expect her to go for at least another week, and we asked her questions, but she would say nothing but that she must get back to London, and she's gone."

"What is her address in London?"

"We don't remember. The two letters she wrote before she came were destroyed, and in the hurry of getting off this morning we never thought to ask. Going like this was a sudden fancy, and Jane says you're at the bottom of it, Squire."

"Mrs. Mackenzie is mistaken."

"I'm right glad to hear it. You mustn't think too hardly of Jane, but she's old-fashioned in some ways, and can't believe that all the stories gossip tells of you are without foundation."

"They have a foundation, Mackenzie."

"They have!"

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"Miss Vaughan may have heard the stories from your wife."

"No, she didn't. She had a mind to tell her, but I said it was no business of ours."

"Then I do not know why Miss Vaughan has gone. There was every reason why she should stay. I came to see her this morning to tell her something which would probably have made her leave Felstead, but until she knew my secret I do not know why she should go. She could not have known it when I left her last night."

"Then she doesn't know it now," said Mackenzie.

"She will write to you, very likely," Densham went on. "When you know her address, will you send that letter for me? I am going to London to try and find her, but I may fail. That letter contains my secret, Mackenzie. I want her to know the truth as soon as possible."

"I'll send it," said Mackenzie, taking the letter. "Tell me, Squire, will it hurt the lass much?"

"More than I dare to think of, Mackenzie."

"Must she know it?"

"Yes. Last night I told her that I loved her. I do love her with all the best that is in me, but I had no right to tell her."

Mackenzie was silent.

"I'll tell you the secret, Mackenzie; then if you see her, if she should come back, you will know what to say to her." Densham paused for a moment, and then went on slowly and deliberately: "All the stories of my leading a fast life in town—of my gambling, card playing, and general profligacy—are so exaggerated as really to be falsehoods. I have led a quieter life than most young men, and I am not conscious of there being any one man or woman who could honestly say they had suffered at my hands, excepting Olive—excepting Miss Vaughan. But there is one great sin in my life which I have tried to make reparation for. One night, some years ago now, I was going home, when I met a girl—she was hardly more. She

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was in trouble, and I spoke to her. It was the old story—a man had ruined her. I took her to the house of a respectable woman I knew, and I looked after her. Time went on, and I think she came to look upon me as her property. She was pretty, and I was a very ordinary man. I loved her in a way, and she became my mistress. This lasted for five years, and then my conscience began to prick me. A late repentance, you will say, but a true one. There was only one course open to me, and I took it. I made her my wife. I was not really in love with her, but I felt I was doing my duty. We traveled half over Europe. I intended to let her see the world, and then bring her to Felstead. No one would know what our past had been. I hadn't been married long before I found out that my wife drank. She had done so before our marriage, but I had never discovered it. It grew worse—it grew into a disease—a madness. Whatever love she had for me turned to hate. My wife is at the Hall now under the charge of my housekeeper and a nurse."

"And yet you told the lass you loved her?"

"I told her the truth."

"You told her a lie, Squire. If you loved her, you would have put a bullet through your head rather than bring this shame upon her. You were man enough to do the right thing once—to make that girl your wife; why hadn't you honor enough to leave Miss Vaughan alone?"

"I have no excuse, Mackenzie. I tried to leave Felstead when she first came, but I didn't. You will send that letter for me if you can?"

"I will send it if I can," said Mackenzie, rising. "I don't want to be hard on a man, Squire, and maybe ye've had temptations which I don't understand. I don't understand, and that's a fact. I'm not ready to think evil, but I've got a standard of honor, and you don't come up to it. I've got a lease of this farm which has a few years to run; when it's up, you must do as you like; but while it's mine, I'll be glad if you'd

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not come through my gates. Ye've played a damned dirty game upon the lass, and the sooner she knows your true worth the better. I'll send the letter at the first opportunity. I think she's sensible enough to forget all about you when she knows what you are. If I thought you'd broken her heart, I'd do my level best to give you a thrashing, strong as you are."

"You're rather hard, Mackenzie; but I suppose it is what I deserve. Don't think too meanly of me. I am not likely to revenge myself when your lease is out, and I will not trespass within your gates."

Densham walked quickly across the yard and into the road. He felt no bitterness toward Mackenzie. His lips had tightened a little when the farmer had talked about thrashing him—that was all. His heart was too full of Olive to feel bitterness against anyone except himself. Why had she gone?

"I must go up to London and find her. I cannot justify myself, but at least I can make confession."

As he crossed the lawn, Parker came out to meet him. Perhaps Olive had sent him some message.

"What is it, Parker?"

"The mistress, sir."

"Worse again?"

"She was sleeping—so the nurse thought, sir. Suddenly she jumped up and rushed out of her room, nurse trying to stop her. The mistress must have caught her foot somehow, and she fell head first down the flight of stairs. I am afraid she is seriously hurt."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"About half an hour ago, sir. I sent James for the doctor at once."

"Quite right."

Densham threw down his hat and went quickly to his wife's room. She lay there quite still and pale, her forehead discolored—so still indeed that death seemed already to have touched her. Silently he sat beside her, looking at her earnestly, seeing as in a vision that night when he had first met her—the half-deserted

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lamp-lit street, the young face with an appeal in it turned up to his.

“Kate!” he murmured.

The nurse heard the whispered name, and pitied the man more than ever.

CHAPTER XVII

THE READING OF THE PLAY

OLIVE had been home a fortnight. The rehearsals of the new piece had not yet commenced, and she found time hang heavily. It had been the longest fortnight in her life.

When Olive returned home, Mrs. Lambert saw at once that there was a change in her young mistress—a change which the mere fact of a holiday did not account for—but she asked no questions. She made no remark about the suddenness of her going nor of her equally unexpected return. She did not even ask where she had been. Gilbert Tennant, on the other hand, was full of questions.

“I thought you had run away for good,” he said.

“Did you?”

“I am immensely pleased to see you back. Where have you been?”

“In the country.”

“Yes; but what part? There is no mystery about it, is there?”

“No; but I’m just going to keep the whereabouts of my retreat to myself. A woman always rejoices in a little secret, you know.”

“I always had an idea it was the letting out of a secret they rejoiced in,” Gilbert answered. “Oh, don’t look so angry; I admit you are different from other women. You shall be the exception to prove the rule.”

“Thank you.”

“Wherever this retreat of yours is, it is evidently a most healthy place. I never saw you look better in my life.”

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"Yes; it is a beautiful place—fields and woods, flowers and hills, new milk and fresh butter, and——"

"One usually gets those kind of things in the country."

"I wasn't attempting to give you a clew," she said, laughing.

"She is changed," Gilbert said to himself. "As an actress she may not be improved, but as a woman she is. I wonder whether there was an eligible man in that retreat of hers?"

A fortnight had gone now, and Mrs. Lambert's quick perception told her that something was wrong. There was an expectancy about Olive. Each morning she seemed bright and cheerful, but toward the end of the day depression invariably came. She was anxious to know whether the postman had passed lately, and what time the next delivery was due. Evidently she expected a letter, and with cruel persistency the postman passed the house with the lamp in Harmony Road.

"Perhaps I was foolish to run away," Olive said to herself. "I ought to have been brave, and told him all about myself, about my father, about the home in the Waterloo Road—everything. Yes, it was foolish to run away. Still, if his love is real he will write to me, or come to me. It is real; I will not doubt him."

So she argued in her more cheerful moods. At the first thought of this wonderful love which had come to her, she had shrunk from the task of telling her history. It was natural. His social position was far superior to hers—not so much as she was now, a singer of some repute—that was an honorable distinction; but as she was formerly, as she was when she was Clara Farrow. It would be easier to tell him, she thought, when he followed her to London, and told her again that he loved her. He would do so; she was certain of that. It never occurred to her that the Mackenzies would not remember her address.

But she had other moods when depression settled

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upon her as a thick fog. Then she seemed able to remember only one fact. It could have no real significance, but it troubled her. Victor had told her that he loved her—he had sealed that love by a kiss upon her lips; but he had not asked her to be his wife.

So she waited for a letter, and started up expectantly whenever the front door bell rang.

Thinking of Victor Densham, Olive remembered Zett. Mrs. Lambert told her that he had called, in the same way that she mentioned that Mr. Tennant and Mr. Edward had done so, and Olive expected to see him every day. When he did not come, she sent to him.

He came down Harmony Road next afternoon with a queer twist in his face. Nobody could possibly have told what that twist meant, whether it was an expression of pleasure or pain, sorrow or anger. Even Olive, who knew him so well, could not interpret it.

"I am glad to see you, Zett," was her greeting.

"Are you?"

"I have been looking for you every day for the last fortnight."

"That surprises me a lot," Zett answered.

"Why?"

"I've been looking for you for a month. I went to my fifth music hall the night afore last. I know now how your name looks in print on the bills outside, but as I didn't see it, I thought maybe you'd changed it again. You might 'a' let me know you was going away, and it was just cruel to say you weren't coming back."

"You foolish fellow, I never said so."

"The woman what lives here along with you said you was gone for good, and ever since I've been looking for you."

"Mrs. Lambert told you that?"

"I don't know her name, but that's what she said. So you meant to come back all the time?"

"I have only been for a holiday. Mrs. Lambert knew perfectly well I was coming back," Olive an-

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swered, an angry flush in her face. "I will talk to her presently. You might have known me better, Zett."

"You left the Waterloo Road without telling me," said Zett.

"That was quite different."

"Maybe; but I'm a fool, you know, and I can't see it. If you don't want me you've only got to say so, and you shan't see me until you're in trouble. I expect I shall be near then."

He held his cap in readiness to put on at a word from her. For a moment Olive felt it in her heart to be angry with him, to let him go if he trusted her so little. She was changed enough to be irritated at the very thought of the suspicions Zett had formerly had about her. But his pathetic figure drove the idea of anger away.

"Don't be foolish, Zett. My housekeeper told you an untruth; you must not make me responsible for that."

"Why don't you sack her?" asked Zett.

"I probably shall."

"Liars ain't no good to nobody. She might say worse things about you."

"What things?"

"Things that I used to say Clara Farrow might be tempted to do."

The color came into her face, and she turned away to hide it from Zett. The thought had a new horror for her now she knew Victor Densham.

"Have you ever seen your friend again?" she asked presently.

"Him what lives in Jermyn Street?"

"Yes."

"I ain't set eyes on him. I wish I could. I'd like you to know him, Olive."

"Perhaps I shall some day."

Zett shook his head doubtfully.

"I doubt it. He ain't one o' the sort to think much o' music-hall singers, I should say. Now, if you'd been at the Surrey."

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"You think that would have made a great difference," laughed Olive. "You might be able to bring him some day to see me."

"Do you suppose he'd come along o' me? It ain't likely."

"If you should see him, Zett, try to make him. Tell him I am interested and want to see him."

Zett came to Harmony Road more often than formerly, much to Mrs. Lambert's annoyance, which she was unable to hide. She declared to her mistress, when accused of having told Zett an untruth, that he had misunderstood her, and Olive said no more. But Mrs. Lambert was merely a servant now. Olive did not attempt to make a companion of her.

A month had passed since her return, and there was still no word from Densham. Olive became terribly depressed at times, and it was a relief to her when the rehearsals began. They were hard work, and she was glad of it.

"Your energy is amazing," Gilbert said to her one afternoon, as they walked down Harmony Road. He had come home with her from the theater.

"I am very anxious to make a success of my part."

"You will. Do you remember my talking to you about a play I was writing?"

"Yes; you promised to read it to me when it was finished."

"It is finished. I brought it with me to-day. Will you listen to it?"

"I should love to hear it. Why not come in to tea and read it now?"

"I was hoping you would suggest it. I have only just finished it, and I shall not be happy until I know your opinion. Unless I come in now, we may not have a chance for some days. By the way, I met Overton this morning. He came back from the Continent last night. He went a day or two after you went away. He said he might possibly call upon you this evening."

"I only hope he doesn't come and spoil our read-

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ing. I have been meaning to ask you why he has not turned up at any of the rehearsals. He is interested in the new piece, isn't he?"

"Considerably, I believe, financially. Your success is likely to pay him a handsome profit, so your indebtedness to him need not trouble you."

"I am glad to know that his pounds, shillings, and pence are likely to come back to him," Olive answered. "I am not ungrateful, but I do not like being indebted to Mr. Overton."

"I hardly think you have ever quite understood him," Tennant answered, loyal to his absent friend.

"I think I have," she answered. "A woman is not often at fault in judging character."

"I must ask you your idea of mine some day," said Tennant.

"One thing at a time. The play is the thing at the present moment. Am I the first to hear it?"

"No; I read it to my wife last night."

"What did she say?"

"Well, she slept through a good deal of it. You see, she is the best little woman in the world, but she is not fond of things theatrical. She woke up toward the end of the last act and said it was very nice. She says exactly the same about Shakespeare, which is a consolation. I admit it was rather late when I began to read, and my wife was darning socks. It may have been the socks which sent her to sleep."

Mrs. Lambert met them as they entered the house.

"Mr. Edward is in the drawing-room."

Olive turned to Tennant with a little grimace.

"Good-by reading," he said.

"Oh, no. We'll have it. If he wants to stay, he must listen too."

Overton met her with extended hand. He did not want her to feel any awkwardness in meeting him because she had refused to marry him. To tell the truth, Olive did not.

"You're looking wonderfully well, and how are the rehearsals going?"

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"Splendidly," Tennant said. "The new piece is going to put a lot of money into your pocket, Overton."

"So long as Miss Vaughan is a success, I do not care."

Olive made no answer. She disliked compliments, and especially when they came from Overton.

"You are destined to listen to a play to-night. Mr. Tennant has come to read me his."

"The real good thing at last, eh, Tennant? I shall be able to boast hereafter at being present at the first reading."

"Oh, no, you won't. My wife heard it last night."

"Did she speak well of it?"

"She said——"

"She considered it equal to Shakespeare," Olive interrupted; "but then of course her opinion is a biased one. We shall be more critical."

Olive had detected the sneer in Overton's voice, and she did not want Tennant to say that his wife had gone to sleep. Overton would have laughed, and Tennant would have treated it as a joke. She had more than once heard Overton laugh at Tennant's wife, and she resented it—was rather angry that Tennant did not resent it too. He would have done had he thought his wife was really being laughed at, but he trusted and believed in his friend. He could not even see that Overton constantly sneered at him, and would have stared in astonishment had any one suggested that he was being made a tool of by Edward Overton.

"We certainly must be more critical," Overton answered.

"I am wanting an honest opinion," said Tennant.

Tea finished, the play was read. It was called "A Woman's Self," and treated of the gradual development of the heroine's character from sordid surroundings to a high ideal. It was full of strong situations; the dialogue was crisp and to the point; the humor was natural and unforced, and helped the action of the plot.

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From the first Olive listened intently. She saw its acting power, saw how it would look behind the foot-lights. Overton, to begin with, was more interested in watching Olive. As others had done, he saw there was a great change in her. Something had happened to her since he had seen her last. But as the play proceeded, he too became absorbed in the heroine of the drama and forgot the woman of real life.

"Curtain," said Tennant, "and a vociferous demand from the gallery to bring on the author to be aimed at."

He folded up the typewritten sheets and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, is there any good in it?"

Olive looked at Overton, who for once was quite honest.

"I confess, Tennant, I settled myself to think of other things while you were reading, and I couldn't do it. Your little world absorbed me so."

"And you, Miss Vaughan?"

"I only know I should love to play your heroine. I believe even I could make a great success of her."

"The famous actress in Gilbert Tennant's masterpiece. Do you remember my saying that when I first knew you? I may have spoken prophetically."

"Who is to have the first chance of it?" Overton asked.

"I am offering it to Mather. I have already spoken to him about it. I think it will have fair consideration from him. He would play the hero. It is a strong part."

"We'll have it played somehow, Tennant," said Overton. "There is a fortune in those sheets, I am convinced."

"It is kind of you to say so."

"Nonsense," said Olive. "I won't say you have written your masterpiece, but you have written your first great play. Don't be too humble, Mr. Tennant. The lion would look exceedingly foolish in the skin of an ass, and for the author of a play like that to

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humble himself would only make the pygmies around him laugh. Great success to you, and I only hope I may share it. One thing I do know, I will witness your triumph though I break the most valuable engagement in London to do so."

"I shall not sing small," said Tennant. "I have fought for years for success. I believe I am standing on the threshold of the temple."

At Olive's request Overton stayed behind when Tennant rose to go.

"That is a fine play," he said, when they were alone.

"Splendid. I wanted to speak to you about another matter. You know I have been away into the country."

"Yes. By the way, where did you go to?" he asked carelessly.

"Into retreat. I have found a quaint little resting place where I can get away from everybody when I like. I did not tell Mrs. Lambert where I was going, and I suppose she resented it. At any rate, when a friend of mine called—the cripple you have heard me speak of—she told him that I had gone away for good. I want you to send Mrs. Lambert away."

"Certainly; and I will get some one else for you."

"Thank you; but I should prefer to choose my own servant. It is very kind of you all the same."

"Shall I speak to Mrs. Lambert now?"

"If you will. I'll ring for her. You quite understand that I want the dismissal to come from you, as you brought her here; so you will excuse me. Good night."

Overton's face tightened a little at this curt dismissal, but he argued that it was only natural after what had passed between them so lately. He could afford to wait.

After his interview with the housekeeper, he left the house with a smile upon his lips. The change in Olive's household, he thought, would be to his advantage in the end. Even Mrs. Lambert smiled. Mr. Edward had given her more money to leave Harmony

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Road than he had given her to come there, and it was quite in her power to do Miss Vaughan an ill turn.

"She'll be sorry she didn't make a friend of me," she said. There was much meaning in the nod she gave.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE POISONED TONGUE OF SCANDAL

A FEW days later Overton and Tennant met in the Strand, and walked together toward Pall Mall.

"Have you heard from Mather yet about the play?"

"Not yet. There has hardly been time."

"And you hope to get Olive to play your heroine?"

"I hope so."

"Even if Mather takes the play, he may not accept the actress."

"If he accepts the play, I shall be able to name conditions," Tennant answered.

"You are taking advice and not being too humble. Well, it was good advice. If we only shout loud enough, the world is usually convinced that we are very fine fellows. The history of Olive Vaughan gave you the main idea of the play, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"You drew pretty freely on your imagination. Your heroine is a much finer specimen than Olive Vaughan."

"There I do not agree with you. And I thought you were in love with her."

"True. I should not fall in love with your heroine. You have made her too good. That, I think, is the weak point of your work."

"It is a good thing to hold a paragon up to the world sometimes," Tennant answered. "It gives the world ideas. The neither very good nor very bad persons are exceedingly common, and there is not very much to be learned from them. Still there are women like my heroine—more of them, perhaps, than

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we imagine. My wife is one. I am inclined to think Miss Vaughan is another."

"The spirit of poetry is upon you, Tennant," Overton returned rather scornfully. "For goodness' sake don't descend to a five-act tragedy in blank verse. Olive Vaughan seems to have changed a good deal lately—don't you think so?"

"Yes; and for the better."

"Country air, I suppose. I always feel extraordinarily virtuous after a sojourn in the country. It takes quite a week in town to suppress it."

"I should make my home in the country, then, if I were you."

"Do you know where Miss Vaughan went?"

"No," Tennant answered.

"I wonder whether she met a man—the man—during her holiday?"

"I think she did," was the answer.

"Some country yokel with farm boots on all day and only stockings feet in the evening; broadcloth on Sunday morning, shirt sleeves on Sunday afternoon."

"I don't fancy it was that kind of man," said Tennant.

"The village curate, perhaps. Church and stage—a queer mixture which I could never understand."

"When she does choose, she will choose wisely; and he will be a lucky man who wins her, Overton," Tennant said.

"Possibly, if she is all you think her; possibly not, if after all she is only like many other actresses, chiefly emotions and nerves."

"I prefer not to discuss her," said Tennant. "It's rather impertinent, I think. If anyone is bound to protect her, you and I are. What she is we have helped to make her. I am proud of my part of the work."

"I have had nothing to do with her education, Tennant. My responsibility does not weigh heavily upon me."

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They parted at Charing Cross Station, and Overton went to the club.

"She shall be mine," he said to himself, as he walked slowly down Pall Mall. "I have used fair means; there are other ways. If the man has arrived, it is time to act. I wish I knew my enemy."

Two men greeted him as he entered the smoking room of the club. They were tools to his hand—men who loved a scandal as a vulture loves carrion. They believed in no woman's virtue, except perhaps in their mothers' and sisters', and in no man's at all. They rather admired Overton, which was somewhat irksome to him as a rule.

"Back again!" exclaimed Emerson. "What has been your little game this time?"

"The Continent."

"A wide field, Overton," said the other man. He was an Honorable, and had been endeavoring all his life to show that he was only so in name. "I'll wager a monkey you've been up to no good. Paris, eh?"

"I passed through Paris."

"Then it is a certainty you were not alone?"

"I do not think I said I was."

"Man or woman?" asked Emerson.

Overton smiled.

"What a question to ask!" exclaimed the Honorable. "Own up, old man—a friend's wife, or a dancer from the Forum?"

"Will you fellows drink?" said Overton. "My friends' wives are seldom attractive, and dancers are always most deceptive."

"Talking of the Forum reminds me," said Emerson; "what's become of the divine Olive? She is a protégée of yours."

"Met her yesterday," said the Honorable. "Looks diviner than ever. Of course, I remember, there was a paragraph in the theatrical notes of some paper saying that after a holiday she was to appear in a new comic opera. By Jove! Holiday! Did she go on the Continent too, Overton?"

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Overton smiled and sipped his whisky.

"The irreproachable Olive!" said Emerson. "I shouldn't have believed it."

"I have made no confession," Overton returned.

"I should be surprised if you had. I admire your choice, Overton; I cannot say I admire hers."

"No?" queried Overton. "Inferior men do sometimes win prizes. Still, you are jumping to rather wild conclusions. I trust you will not inform anyone that you have had the information direct from me."

"Secret as the grave, old man," said Emerson.

"Well, I must tell Bella," said the Honorable. "She's always had a down on Olive, and Bella's a good sort, though not quite a saint. Did you hear what she said to old Lord Peckham one night?"

"For goodness' sake, don't tell that story again," said Overton. "I wonder Bella doesn't make a point of forgetting it, for Peckham must have been dead ten years, and she would be insulted if you took her for more than twenty-three."

The Honorable and Emerson left together soon afterwards.

"If the fools will jump to conclusions, it is no fault of mine," Overton mused. "Bella is not likely to let such a story die for want of nursing, and Olive—well, it will bring her to her senses. Marriage with me will be her salvation, and I fancy she will see the necessity, once this story is well floated." He smoked for some moments, his brow knit. His own arguments did not quite satisfy him. "I wish it could have come to pass in another way—a legitimate way; but I love her, and somehow I must win her. Everything is fair in love and war. The man was a philosopher who said so."

For some little time he had the smoking room to himself; and then a man stood in the doorway a moment, and seeing Overton, entered.

"Densham!"

"I am rather a stranger. I have been very little in London lately."

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"And that conscience of yours—have you satisfied it? I have often thought of the conversation we had in this room. You were interested in a man sitting on a heap of stones. How is he prospering on his journey?"

"He has encountered some bad weather."

"I told you he would," said Overton. "Joking apart, did your conscience lead you right?"

"Oh, yes."

"And successfully?"

"I hardly know how to answer truthfully," Densham answered. "Unfortunately I can only see one side of the question."

"The experience has altered you?"

"Oh, no; I am just the same. I am a little rusty, a little tired of the country—that is all. After all, one grows older, Overton, and our ideas change. I remember the time when I could sit through a music-hall entertainment from the overture to 'God save the King.' I couldn't do it now. Could you?"

"Under certain circumstances I might. A good dancer still pleases me, I am glad to say."

"Any new stars?"

Overton mentioned two or three men and women who had come to the front.

"All new to me," Densham said. "But then you were always interested in theatrical things. I was never much of a playgoer. The last place I was in was the Forum. I remember there was a very clever singer there that night—a woman. What was her name?"

Overton smiled.

"There have been a good many clever women at the Forum. Would it be Kate Dalrymple? A large number of people thought a great deal of her."

"No; that was not the name. It was Olive—Olive——"

"Olive Vaughan," said Overton, glancing furtively at his companion.

"That's the woman. What has become of her?"

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Overton shook his head.

"She is not playing in London now?"

"I don't think so," Overton answered.

"I would go and hear her again," said Densham.

"Seeing you must have made me think of her, for I remember meeting a man that night who told me she was a discovery of yours, or something of that kind."

"Curious in what a haphazard way men will talk," replied Overton. "An author, or perhaps I ought to say a hack-worker, found her, heard her sing somewhere or other, and I helped him to give her a start."

"A little piece of your philanthropy, eh? Very interesting. She seemed to be a great draw at the Forum."

"She was—for a time. These kind of people, my dear Densham, are like shooting stars—very brilliant, but short-lived."

"I suppose so. Still, she seemed to me so much out of the common. It was not only her singing, but herself. She was a lovely woman, you must admit that."

Overton shrugged his shoulders.

"The footlights increase the charm wonderfully. One's grandmother would look young behind them."

Densham laughed, but it was not at what Overton said. He was thinking of a moonlight night, of a girl whose eyes had looked into his, of a kiss upon his lips the fragrance of which still lingered. What charm had the footlights ever lent to that woman!

"I suppose you are right. All the same, I should like to see her again."

"Go and see Kate Dalrymple—you'll think just as much of her. You will soon renew your youth, Densham, if you can still feel an interest in a music-hall singer."

"It seemed to me that Olive Vaughan was more than that," said Densham.

"Off the stage she may be Mrs. Smith, with a drunken husband and half a dozen disorderly children."

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"She may be," said Densham carelessly. "I shall see you again. I expect to be in town for some time."

Overton waited until he had gone.

"I wonder, is he the man? He was pumping me. A mere music-hall singer doesn't interest him like that." He got up and walked to another seat. The movement showed his excitement. "He is the man—my enemy. So our paths in life cross at last, do they? It was to Felstead Olive went. And this fellow Densham has a secret. He was the man on the stone heap, and there was a woman to be helped on. His secret is worth everything to me now. If Olive loves him, and I can prove him a villain, there is another trump card in my hand. I must find out the secret. I must know for certain before I speak."

He opened Bradshaw.

"I can't go to-morrow or the next day. The weekend will do. A Sunday at Felstead should be productive. I must have patience. Even if Densham manages to trace her before I am ready, it will not matter if I can learn his secret. I must let those fellows have time to spread their scandal, too. Olive must know what people are saying about her before I take the rôle of knight-errant—a precipitate appearance would spoil the play. Had Tennant known this development, he might have found a finer curtain for his third act. Everybody plays into my hands. You are in the net, my dear Olive. I will release you only as my wife—my wife. It is an honorable end. I harm her only on the surface. I love her."

His conscience was quiet. Conscience leaves some men alone. Overton's had ceased to worry him long ago. He said he loved her, and there was no small voice to tell him that he lied, that his whole love was passion, and that to be his wife would be her dishonor, her shame in God's sight made legal in the sight of men.

CHAPTER XIX

ZETT GIVES INFORMATION

THE rehearsals of the new piece were in full swing, but Overton did not put in an appearance at any one of them. He was not desirous of meeting Olive just yet. He wanted the Honorable to tell his story to Bella first, and let that poison work; and he was anxious to find out Densham's secret by making inquiries at Felstead.

But everybody did not play into his hands to the extent he had counted upon. The poison did not work so rapidly, or so potently, as he believed it would. The scheme virtually broke down at the very point where it seemed strongest. The Honorable told Bella—told the story with plentiful embroideries of his own; but instead of Bella gloating over it and making haste to spread it, she flatly refused to believe it.

"My dear girl, I assure you it is a fact," said the Honorable, somewhat taken aback.

"I don't believe it; but supposing it is true, what then?"

"Well, the immaculate Vaughan is inclined to ride the high horse, and a tumble might do her good."

"You think so? And pray what harm has she ever done you?"

"None. I did not know you were so fond of her."

"I'm not. We're different; but I've not got so low down, my boy, as to use your scandals to take away another girl's character. She's good right through is Olive Vaughan. She may be a little stand-offish and all that kind of thing—it's her way; but she's always ready to help anyone who is down on her luck;

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and as for your tale, you can take my word for it, it's a lie."

"I don't think so."

"Did you get it first hand from Overton?"

"Not exactly first hand."

"But very nearly. You take my tip and never believe a word he says, unless he tells you he's a black-guard. You can believe that."

"Oh, I know he's a bit of an outsider."

"And one thing more—if you want to reckon me among your friends, you'll just forget the story altogether, for if you whisper it to a soul, I'll never speak to you again!"

The Honorable was attached to Bella, and this threat effectually shut his mouth for the time being. Emerson, it is true, repeated the story; but it got about very slowly, and in a half-hearted manner. The fact was that few trusted Overton, and many had good reason to be grateful to Olive Vaughan. True, she heard a whisper about herself, but it was so indefinite that she took no notice of it. She had heard the same kind of thing before. It is one of the penalties of being on the stage.

So the rehearsals went on, and preliminary notification of the piece had appeared in the papers. The name had been changed at least half a dozen times, and the date of production had been fixed, probably to be changed, too, before the time arrived. But Victor Densham chanced to see none of these notices. He never passed a music hall without scanning the bills; it never occurred to him to look for Olive's name in the theater announcements. He was convinced that Overton knew more about her than he pretended to do, but he was equally certain that he was unlikely to get any information out of him.

"Perhaps he is my rival," he thought; and then he said aloud—"My rival! Well, if I have done nothing but saved her from Overton, I have done something."

He had not spoken to Robin Mackenzie since the

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day he had been requested to keep outside the farmer's gate. It was not that he bore him any malice, but that he had not chanced to meet him. He did not know whether Olive had received his letter or not. If she had, she must hate him; if she had not, why had she hidden herself from him? She could have written to him. He almost hoped she had not got the letter. He felt it would be easier now to tell her the truth face to face.

"I must find her somehow."

He inquired at the Forum, but they either could not, or would not, tell him anything. He thought of Zett, but how was he to find him? He had a faint recollection that the cripple had told him where he lived, but he could not remember where it was.

Days slipped by, and he was no nearer to the end of his search, when one evening, as he was about to go out to his club to dinner, his servant told him that a man wanted to see him. The servant was a temporary one, Parker not being with his master in Jermyn Street.

"He says he will not keep you more than a minute."

"Oh, well, bring him in," answered Densham impatiently.

Zett entered, his cap in his hand.

"Beg pardin, sir, but——"

"You're the most welcome visitor I've had for weeks," said Densham excitedly, as he grasped Zett's hands and drew him to a chair.

"It's very good o' you, guv'nor; but you must have had some queer visitors if I'm the best on 'em."

"Never mind that, Zett. Have you had any dinner?"

"Dinner! What! at this time o' day? I sat on a shady step and had mine about twelve."

"Of course you did. I was forgetting. But you might be hungry. We'll call it supper."

"No, I ain't hungry."

"Thirsty?"

"Not particular."

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Densham went to the sideboard.

"Have a glass of wine, Zett."

"It's a thing that don't often come my way."

"Now, Zett, tell me all the news," said Densham, putting the wine on the table.

"News?"

"Yes. You came to see me about something, I suppose."

"It wasn't about news. I've done with that for the day. Sold out at five o'clock. One o' my jobs is selling papers, gov'nor. This is powerful good wine—better than you gets at the King's Arms at fourpence, I bet."

"I dare say. I don't know the place."

"Don't know it! I say, gov'nor, you've still got a bit to learn, ain't you? It's by Waterloo Station, and there's a lot o' actors goes there, 'cos it's near the gents as gets 'em something to act. They calls it Poverty Corner sometimes, perhaps 'cos I stand sellin' my papers there."

"Actors! There was a friend of yours became an actress."

"A singer, gov'nor. She ain't no actress. I've told her so."

"Then you have seen her—lately?" Densham asked, with difficulty repressing his excitement.

"Yes. It's about her I've come to see you."

"Did she send you?"

"No. It was like this. I've spoken o' you once or twice, told her as how it was through you I found her, and I told her what you said. She was interested, an' the other day she says perhaps she'll happen to know you some time."

"When did she say that, Zett?"

"A few days ago."

"Not a month?"

"No, nothing like it. She went away for a holiday, only a woman what lives with her said she had gone for good—tellin' a lie, gov'nor; and it's since she come back we was talkin' o' you."

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"Yes."

"She says she might know you some day, and I says it ain't likely, 'cos you weren't the sort to run after singers; and she says to me as how I might bring you along to see her some day, that was if I chanced to see you; and I says it wasn't likely you'd come along o' me."

"But I will, Zett."

"You're interested too, eh? That's a rum thing, that is, ain't it? Two people what's never seen each other being interested. Just like a Surrey drama."

"Just like it."

"How do you know? You told me you'd never been to the Surrey Theayter."

"But I know the kind of plays they have there."

"I suppose they has some nearly as good at other places. You see, gov'nor, she didn't expect I should come and ask you to go. She didn't mean me to do that, but I thought I would, she's been so set upon it. To hear her talk, you'd think she knew you as well as I did."

"She talks of me, then," said Densham thoughtfully.

"She's got into the way when she's with me. It's my knowin' you what interested her."

"I see, Zett. When shall we go?"

"Well, I was goin' to say to-morrow, but I've got a job on in the afternoon. You can only see her for certain in the afternoon. She'll give you a rare good tea, and jam if you likes it. I've been thinkin' you might go by yourself to-morrow. Say I sent you, but don't say I come and asked you. Make it out accident like."

"I'll go, Zett. What's the address?"

"Harmony Road, S.W. There's a number, but I forget it. You can't miss the house. It's got an iron lamp hanging outside the door."

"I shall find it."

"I hope you'll like her," said Zett. "She ain't nice to everybody."

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"She may not like me," Densham answered.

"I think she will. You see, she kind of half knows you already by what I've told her."

"True. I shall not be quite like a stranger."

Zett would take no more wine, and left the house.

"Then she has not got my letter," Densham said to himself. "I am glad. It is far easier to tell her the truth now. In less than twenty-four hours I shall see her. What will she say to me?"

There was the light of happiness in his face, but it soon died out. He was like a man standing on the threshold of the unknown.

"To-morrow night I shall know," he said. "But I cannot stand a night like that other one. What ages ago it seems!"

He went out and walked to the club. A few men were dining, nobody he knew particularly, and he sat down in a corner. He would have welcomed a friend to have dinner with him, and he mentioned two or three names to the waiter, asking if they were in the club. The waiter inquired, but they were not. He was so little inclined for his own company that he even welcomed Overton, who came in afterwards.

"I'll come to your table if you don't mind," Overton said. "I'm frightfully hungry. You're dining a bit late, aren't you?"

"Yes; I was detained just as I was starting out."

"I'm just up from the country."

"Pleasure or business?"

"Business chiefly," answered Overton. "I cannot say I am in love with the country. I want to get there when I'm not there, and as soon as I am there I want to get back. I fancy I get more restless as I get older."

"An evil conscience, perhaps," Densham suggested.

"No; I don't think so. I have come to an arrangement with my conscience. We are on the most excellent terms. That's right, waiter. Give me a glass of sherry and then a small bottle of Mumm. By the way, Densham, did you ever meet Gilbert Tennant?"

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"The name seems familiar."

"That's quite likely. He is an author, poet, musician—anything you like. He's written the lyrics for one or two musical comedies, and—yes, he wrote some of the songs for that Miss Vaughan you were asking me about."

"I remember—that is why the name is familiar. They distributed a leaflet of one of her songs with the programme the night I went to the Forum."

"They used to do so, I know," answered Overton. "He's a clever fellow. I am told Mather is to produce a play of his, and Mather does not usually associate himself with trash. Tennant is the man who discovered Olive Vaughan, you know."

"The author you mentioned the other night?"

"Yes."

"You know Tennant well, I suppose?"

"Fairly well. He's married, and that somewhat hampers him. He is out of the run of the men who might be really useful to him. It is a great mistake for a man who has artistic perceptions to marry. Do you happen to have run Miss Vaughan to earth? You seemed rather anxious to do so."

"I am afraid I gave you rather a wrong impression," Densham answered. "I said I should like to hear her sing again."

"Exactly," laughed Overton. "But as you challenged me on the fact of her being a beautiful woman, I concluded that you were interested in her apart from her voice."

"You're romantic, Overton."

"Thanks, Densham. I have often been troubled because people will not give me the credit for it. I have a practical side to my character, and that is the only side my friends seem able to appreciate. It's the same with a man who happens to have both money and brains; you will find his friends invariably think only of his money. As it happens, however, I was not weaving a romance between you and Miss Vaughan. I fancy she is rather a practical young person, too."

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"Is she?"

"I should say so; knows the exact value of a pound sterling, and the character of a man from his smallest virtue to his biggest vice. Actresses do, you know. They get a lot of practice in judging."

Overton went on with his dinner. His appetite was excellent. A smile wrinkled the corners of his mouth, for he was very pleased with himself. He knew Densham's secret from the beginning to the end of it. The trump cards were all in his hands. He had only to play the game straightforwardly and he could hardly lose. At the same time he could not help admiring Densham for fencing him so well. It is always pleasant to meet a foeman worthy of one's steel, especially if his defeat is a certainty.

Overton's estimate of Olive's character hit Densham hard. He felt that Overton was right. He dreaded the meeting with her to-morrow more than ever.

"Will you play a game of billiards?" said Overton. "I feel as if a walk round the table would do me good."

"I don't mind."

"I suppose you give me twenty-five in a hundred and a beating too, I dare say. Yes, she's practical is our little friend, and upon occasions has, I fancy, as friend Sheridan puts it, 'An unforgiving eye and a damned disinheriting countenance.' However, that will not trouble us. She has nothing to forgive us; and as we are not in love with her, she cannot make us bankrupt in that commodity. Let us go and have our game."

It was Densham who was beaten. He was by far the better player, but luck was against him.

"It is a good omen," said Overton to himself, as he walked up St. James's Street, after parting with Densham on the steps of the club. "I have a pretty story to tell Olive to-morrow—a very pretty story. If her love can survive it, I know nothing of women."

He got into a cab in Piccadilly, and as he did so a cripple stopped to watch him.

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“That’s the cove what goes to see her sometimes, the one she don’t think much on. I wouldn’t trust him fur. He ain’t like my pal, Mr. Victor Densham. I hope she likes him. I’ll be disappointed if she don’t, and that’s a moral.”

CHAPTER XX

OVERTON'S TRUMP CARD

ALTHOUGH Olive heard little of the scandalous tales which had been slowly circulating concerning her, Gilbert Tennant heard them. He treated them with contempt, at first, and knowing them to be untrue laughed at them. They were so preposterous that of course nobody would believe them. But the fact of his being asked whether there was any truth in the stories which were floating about by a man whose integrity and honesty of purpose he could not doubt, made him think more seriously about the matter. He made an effort to trace the stories back to their fountain head, of course without success. Whoever can find the first person who breathes lies of this kind? No man's name was coupled with Olive's. The story simply affirmed that there was some one, and everybody who repeated it was anxious to find out who the some one was.

Gilbert wondered if Olive had heard the tales—wondered if he ought to warn her.

"I cannot tell her," he decided. "She must know, and think it best to take no notice. I wish she had some real woman friend."

It was in quite another frame of mind that Overton walked down Harmony Road. If Olive had not thought seriously of the tales, he intended to point out their seriousness—the indefinite he purposed to make definite. Victor Densham's secret was the strongest card he held. He intended to keep that until the last.

He was shown into the drawing-room by a servant,

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one of Olive's own choosing, and Olive came in almost immediately.

"I expected Mr. Tennant—I did not expect you."

"Ah, Gilbert is a privileged person. It is good to be an author."

"He helps me a great deal. I am afraid we talk little but shop."

"Miss Vaughan must not forget that the partnership was a triangular one. I have honestly endeavored to do my share of the work, I assure you."

"I am certain of that; but you see Mr. Tennant is, as it were, in my own profession, and you are not. It makes such a lot of difference. Is there anything particular you want to see about?"

"Yes."

Olive leaned back in her chair to listen.

"I want you to understand that I am your friend. I have not been fortunate enough to secure your confidence as I could have wished, but——"

"Please, Mr. Overton, I would rather not discuss that question. Believe me, it is useless, quite useless."

"My dear Miss Vaughan, you will pardon me, but you are rather jumping to conclusions, are you not?" said Overton, with a smile. "I am not desirous of discussing an old question except in so far as it affects the reason for my being here."

"I am sorry I misunderstood you."

"Have you by chance heard anything about me at the theater or elsewhere?"

"I have heard you spoken of."

"In what connection?"

"As having a financial interest in the new piece. I think you will find the investment pay."

"Let me put the question in another way. Have you heard anything about yourself?"

"I really do not know what you are asking about, Mr. Overton. Would it not be better to speak out plainly and have done with it?"

"I think you might help me out of my difficulty a little."

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"I would if I knew what it was. You may speak out—I always do myself."

"Very well. You have been for a holiday lately. Do you know where you spent it?"

"Certainly," Olive returned, changing color a little.

"Do you know where people are saying you spent it?"

"No; and what is more, I do not care."

"They say you were on the Continent, and that you were not alone."

"Who says so?"

"That plural voice called scandal; and what is more, it is thoroughly believed. In my own club I have heard the story. I have been asked a dozen times if it is true, and when I have denied it, have been laughed at for not knowing."

"And pray why should you be asked, Mr. Overton? I was not aware that you were the master of my movements."

"No; but people believe that I am, or rather that you are the mistress of mine. They say I was your companion on the Continent."

"You?"

There was no mistaking the contempt in her voice, and Overton bit his lips angrily under his mustache.

"I have denied it indignantly," he said; "but these kind of tales are born far easier than they can be killed. In short, Miss Vaughan, my denial is not believed."

"I cannot understand why the scandal-mongers should have selected you," said Olive, looking him straight in the eyes. "I should have thought you would have been the last person thought of. Of all my—my friends"—she hesitated a little before the word—"I have seen least of you."

"How are people to know that?" Overton asked.

"Why should they think otherwise?"

"It is only fair to say that circumstances have somewhat favored the supposition. I unfortunately went on the Continent at the same time as you went into the country. For some reason, which of course

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is no business of mine, you chose to keep your destination a secret. Well, people who give currency to these kind of tales are apt to jump to conclusions."

"If I should find it necessary, I can easily prove that I was not on the Continent," said Olive.

"I think I should do so, Miss Vaughan. I am afraid, however, you will be laughed at as I was."

"I hope not. Even among my enemies I have a reputation for speaking the truth."

"I think you fail to understand the full seriousness of the position," Overton went on suavely. "Circumstances are decidedly against us."

"Us?"

"I say so because our names have been coupled, and we may as well look facts in the face. The visit to the Continent is only one thing. That, having started the scandal, has made people remember that it was due to me that you got a hearing on the stage. They have discovered—how I do not pretend to know—that for some years you were being educated at my expense—living at my expense; and they ask, should I be likely to do all this for nothing?"

"Your reputation must be very bad, Mr. Overton, to make them ask such a question."

"They would say the same of any man. The world does not believe in a man's disinterestedness where a beautiful woman is concerned, and the world cannot be blamed for that. Experience has taught it that men are not Platonic as a rule. I cannot deny that part of what is said is true, consequently it is believed that the whole is true."

"Well?" asked Olive, when he paused.

She did not intend to help him. She wanted to hear him to the end. She was rapidly learning the value of this friend.

"Once it would not have mattered much. Sober-minded people did not expect morality in connection with the stage. But the times are changing. Actors and actresses are no longer mummers and vagabonds—they are personalities in society. Your reputation

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is at stake, Miss Vaughan, and if you would save it you must act at once."

"I do not see the necessity. It is you who repeat these tales to me. I hear them from no one else."

"I can only repeat that you are spoken of as my mistress. You force me to tell you the truth."

"People have been strangely considerate in keeping it from the only person it can possibly hurt," said Olive quietly. "Frankly, I think you exaggerate the position."

"For your own sake, for my sake, you must prove that the tale is untrue," Overton urged.

"Will you tell me how? It cannot be so serious if I can do that."

"There is a way to silence these blackguards once and for all. I love you—have loved you from the first moment I saw you—marry me."

"I thought that question was not to be discussed between us."

"It must be. I love you. I cannot bear to hear these stories told about you, Olive; give me the right to throw the lies back in the world's face."

"That is impossible. I will be quite honest, Mr. Overton. Were marriage with you my only salvation, I should be irretrievably lost."

"You hate me so much?"

"I do not love you," she answered.

"Nor trust me?" he said, with a sneer.

"I would rather say no more."

"You are considerate," he said. "I have been considerate too. Even now I confess that I love you; I cannot help it; but it is against my better judgment that I have asked you again to be my wife. Had you said yes, I should have buried what I know, and forgotten it. Forgive me, but I can be honest too."

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Overton, I prefer to be alone."

She got up to ring the bell, but Overton intercepted her.

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"You shall hear me," he said. "I know your secret."

"Will you let me pass, please?"

"Not until you have heard me. Do you suppose that the beautiful Olive Vaughan, of whom every clerk and counter-jumper speaks familiarly, can be at Felstead for weeks without people knowing anything about it?"

"Perhaps not," she answered.

"And have a lover there and no one know—a man whose touch would sully the reputation of any woman."

"You lie," she said passionately.

"Victor Densham!" laughed Overton. "Victor Densham whispered in your ear, and you, poor beautiful simpleton, were caught. Will he, think you, ask you to marry him?"

White with passion, Olive made an effort to get to the bell or to the door, but Overton caught her wrists and held her.

"To be called my mistress could not hurt you, because I could make you my wife. To be spoken of as his mistress will be a different matter. You fool, Olive, Victor Densham is married already. While he whispered compliments to you in the lanes, she sat at home waiting for him. A nice lover for Miss Vaughan."

"It isn't true," she said.

"Are you certain you didn't know it. The wife doesn't count for much to the woman who is infatuated with her husband."

He let her go, and she steadied herself by the table.

"You're a great scoundrel," she said.

"At least I am a truthful one."

There was a ring at the front-door bell.

"I will go," said Overton, taking up his hat; but as he crossed the room the door opened, and the servant announced "Mr. Tennant and Mr. Densham."

"I met this gentleman on the doorstep," said Gilbert, approaching Olive. Then he stopped and looked

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from her to Overton. "I am afraid our visit is ill-timed."

"A curtain for your next play, Tennant. Not a serious drama—a mere comedy, if Miss Vaughan will allow me to say so."

Densham had remained near the door. He, too, looked from Olive to Overton.

"So you have found your way at last, Densham," Overton went on. "I have had no opportunity of telling Miss Vaughan how desperately anxious you were to find her."

"I do not wonder at that, when you told me you did not know where Miss Vaughan was to be found."

"I do not think I actually said so, but let it pass. I am not an inquiry agent. You led me to believe that you had never met Miss Vaughan. May I have the pleasure of introducing you?"

"It is quite unnecessary," said Olive, looking at Densham. It was an effort to look at him as she did. His eyes fell before hers.

"I happened to mention your wife to Miss Vaughan," said Overton carelessly. "She was quite surprised to hear you had a wife."

"You—" Densham stopped himself with an effort. His face was set, his hands clenched. Overton was not a physical coward, but he started back as Densham made one step toward him. For a moment Densham was silent, and then said—"Possibly it would surprise Miss Vaughan. The object of my call was to speak of her."

Olive laughed—a laugh that had contempt in it, and a sob in it too.

"I suppose you have no longer any wish to prevent my leaving the room?" she said, turning to Overton. "I know the worst now, I imagine. There are no more insinuations against my reputation you can make, I presume? It is a pretty scheme you are all engaged in. It is an excellent thing to plot and lie in the effort to ruin a woman's character."

This was too much for Tennant.

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“Miss Vaughan, I swear——”

“You—you are but the tool of this man. Did you not long ago go bail for his honor?” she said, pointing at Overton. “Honor! He has none. Your own is forfeited. Thank God I know you all as you are. Continue your plotting. It will take more than a trio of scoundrels to hurt me. A clear conscience will be defense enough against the lies of you three—gentlemen.”

Densham opened the door for her.

“Miss Vaughan, I——”

She did not look at him. With her head erect, and infinite contempt upon her lips, she left the room without another word.

CHAPTER XXI

SCOUNDRELS FACE TO FACE

DENSHAM closed the door with a sharp click, and turned to face his two companions.

Overton stood leaning against the mantelpiece, his hat in his hand, the ghost of a smile upon his lips.

Tennant dropped into a chair by the table. For the first time in his life he had been called a scoundrel, accused of plotting against a woman's honor, and by Olive Vaughan of all people in the world. It had all happened so suddenly he hardly realized it.

The three men looked at one another, each waiting for the other to speak. There was silence in the room for a minute or two. It seemed much longer. It was broken by Overton.

"As I told you, Densham, 'An unforgiving eye and a damned disinheritng countenance.' I understand why she has been such a success on the boards. She will play the heroine in your play to perfection, Tennant."

"Let us drop fooling," said Densham savagely. "What explanation have you got to give me?"

"Explanation! None, my dear fellow," was the airy answer. "What should I have to explain?"

"You lied to me when you said you did not know where Miss Vaughan was."

"I admit the prevarication. You were guilty of the same offense when you led me to suppose that you were not acquainted with Miss Vaughan. I think we may cry quits so far."

"By what right do you discuss my affairs with Miss Vaughan?"

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"By the right that any honest man may lay claim to," Overton answered. "I think you are aware that I have business relations with Miss Vaughan—the fact gives me a further right to protect her."

"She did not seem grateful for your protection," sneered Densham.

"She had not had time to realize the position when you came in. Better let the matter rest as it is, Densham. I have no desire to use harsh words to you."

"Don't play the hypocrite. You did not come here only to tell her that I was married. That she knows, or should know, because I confessed the truth to her long ago."

"You have accused me of lying, Densham. It's rather a vulgar thing to do, so I will not follow your example. Miss Vaughan did not know, or my information would not have surprised her as it did. Do I make myself clear?"

"I will answer that question when you have answered me to the end. What else did you say of me?"

"Nothing else. There was no need."

"What did you come here for?"

Overton laughed.

"I am not in a witness-box, but really your questions amuse me, Densham, and I feel inclined to answer them. You are perhaps not aware that this house belongs to me; that my money—do you understand, my money—is responsible for Miss Vaughan's success. Tennant can bear me witness if you do not believe me."

"That fact did not bring you here to-day."

"I had business with Miss Vaughan certainly," Overton answered. "It was of a private nature."

"That's the truth at last," said Densham. "You came to bully her. For some purpose of your own you came to cast aspersions upon her character. She said so. By Heaven! if I had heard one single word of your foul insinuations, I would have thrashed the life out of you. You're a miserable hound."

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"Steady, Densham. You go a trifle too far," said Overton angrily. "If there is a miserable hound among us, it is you."

Densham made a step toward him. Tennant got up quickly to prevent blows.

"I repeat it," said Overton. "If there is such an animal in this room it is you, Victor Densham. Do you wonder that, knowing as I do of your ménage at Felstead, I did not tell you where Miss Vaughan was to be found?"

"I think we had better go," said Tennant quietly. "We are keeping Miss Vaughan from the room."

Overton paid no attention to him, but went on.

"I love Olive Vaughan, and have told her so. You profess to love her, and have told her so. Tell me, which is the more honest love, yours or mine?"

"Mine," Densham answered.

"What! When you have a wife already?"

"I still say mine. It is evident you failed to win her, and in revenge sought to defame her. Is that honest love?"

"You jump to conclusions, my dear fellow," Overton answered. "You very inconsiderately disturbed me. I think Tennant is right. We ought to go. It is evident that our ideas of honor will not agree. However, Miss Vaughan is apparently of my way of thinking, judging by her treatment of you. Are you coming, Tennant?"

"I am leaving the house, yes, but I wish to go alone."

"As you like," answered Overton. He had hoped to draw Tennant with him to Densham's discomfiture, but he failed. He had opened the room door, and stood debating whether he should make another effort to obtain Tennant's support.

"I seem to have suffered by being in bad company," Gilbert said. "I have drawn upon myself the contempt of a woman I most sincerely respect. It is true I pledged my word for your honor, Overton; it is equally true I have forfeited my own by doing so. I

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have heard the tales, the lies, told about Olive Vaughan, and in her interest I have tried to trace them to their source. Until now I have failed. I have had my suspicions—now I know you, Overton. Our ways lie in opposite directions.”

“You fool,” said Overton savagely. “Are you in love with her too—another married man?”

“As for you, Mr. Densham, we are strangers. You may have some reasonable explanation to give of your conduct. I don’t know. I am nothing to you, so my good or my bad opinion of you can make no difference.”

“Believe me, it will. I have a reasonable explanation to offer to Miss Vaughan.”

“When Miss Vaughan accepts it, I will try to think well of you,” answered Tennant.

“A pretty scene,” sneered Overton. “If the curtain ever rises on your first play, Tennant, here is the germ for a second. But the curtain hasn’t risen on the first yet, remember, and you can hardly expect me to exert my influence on your behalf now.”

“I do not ask it, nor is it necessary. The play was finally accepted this morning.”

“Well, Tennant, for old acquaintance’ sake, good luck to it,” said Overton. He had caught sight of Olive on the stairs as he went into the hall. It had not the effect upon her Overton desired; for she had been there some minutes, and had heard the conversation since Overton had opened the room door. She had heard what Tennant had said, heard Densham declare that he had a reasonable explanation to offer. An intense longing came to her to hear that explanation. If she let Densham go now, perhaps she never would hear it. Pride would have her stay upstairs until the three men had gone, but love urged her to listen to the confession of the man who, until a short hour ago, was the only man in the world for her.

Densham followed Tennant from the room as Overton opened the front door.

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"Mr. Densham, will you stay? I want to speak to you."

He started, for he had not seen her on the stairs. He bowed his head, and remained standing there. Overton went out with a sneer; Tennant followed him, and closed the door gently behind him.

"You misjudge me, Tennant," Overton said. "I swear you misjudge me."

"I think I judge more leniently than you deserve. There is no doubt in my mind of the justice of my judgment."

"I love her, man. Can you make no excuses for me?"

"Excuse you for spreading these stories about her! The other man was right. You are a miserable hound, Overton. He may be another for all I know, but at least he spoke the truth when he called you so."

"You will live to think differently of me and ask my pardon," Overton answered, and he went quickly up the road. He was destined to prove a false prophet, for they never met again.

Tennant crossed the road to his own house. His wife met him in the hall.

"What is it, Gilbert? You look worried and fagged to death."

He drew her into his den and closed the door.

"I am worried, Mary. I could sit down and cry like a child."

"The play, dearest; it has been refused. Never mind, Gilbert, some other manager will take it. It is not like you to let a disappointment trouble you. You have had so much success lately, you cannot bear the failures as you used to."

"It is not the play, Mary. Mather accepted that this morning."

"O Gilbert, I am glad. I am going to believe in your genius now."

"I came home rejoicing, and then——"

"Tell me all about it."

She sat down in the only chair which was free from

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papers, and Gilbert leaned against his writing desk. He told her everything, from his first suspicion of Overton to the climax which had been reached that afternoon.

"I always said Edward Overton was no good," was the first remark she made. Womanlike, she was delighted that her words had come true. "Who is this other man? A similar specimen, I suppose?"

"I know nothing of him. He may be as bad or worse than Overton."

"Yet she asked him to stay."

"Don't misjudge her, Mary. Believe me, she is in sore need of a friend—a woman friend. That she asked this man to stay is in his favor. She is a good woman, Mary—as pure as you are. Would she have called me a scoundrel otherwise?"

"That does not prejudice me in her favor."

"She didn't mean it. She judged me by my friends. I cannot blame her."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go to her. Offer her your friendship. She will bless you for it, and you will never regret it."

"I will go."

"Thank you, Mary."

"Does that house belong to Overton?"

"Yes; but she has begun to pay him rent for it."

"But the furniture is his—everything in it is his?" said Mrs. Tennant.

"Everything."

"What a net the despicable villain has spread for her. She mustn't stay in it another day. She shall come here until she can get another house. Let her cut herself away from him altogether."

"Perhaps she will not come here," said Gilbert.

"Why not?"

"I am here."

"Leave that to me. She will think no evil of you when I have talked to her. I may be there some time, so I'll just go and settle about the children first. Come with me to the children, Gilbert. They will

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love a romp to-night. And you must tell them that the play is going to be acted."

Gilbert kissed his wife.

"You're a dear little woman, Mary. You have had a hard time of it sometimes with me, but if only this play is a success, there are much better things in store for us."

"Of course it will be a success, and worthy of you. Come to the children."

Mrs. Tennant left her husband romping and laughing with them when she went out to offer a woman's help and sympathy to Olive Vaughan.

CHAPTER XXII

THE END OF VICTOR DENSHAM'S QUEST

As the front door closed, Olive descended the stairs. She went into the drawing-room without a word, and Densham followed her. He closed the door slowly, trying to find words to speak to her. He turned toward her, standing almost exactly where he had stood when he had first entered the room.

"What have you to say to me?" she said.

"So much, and yet as I stand before you now I feel as though I were dumb. I half wish you had let me go—am inclined to let you think the worst of me."

"Then you have no reasonable explanation to offer? I heard you tell Mr. Tennant you had."

"I thought I spoke the truth; but standing face to face with you, my excuses seem so very weak. Will you listen to me for a few moments? Do not look at me. Let me tell you my miserable story without seeing the contempt in your eyes."

"Tell it me," she said; and she sat down, her face half turned away from him, her hands folded in her lap.

Densham told her the story of his marriage in a level, almost monotonous voice—told it as though he were reciting a lesson he had committed to memory. There was no bitterness in his tone as he spoke of his wife's drunkenness, of her hatred of him.

"This was the position when you came to Felstead. I went nowhere. I never spoke of my wife. Hardly anyone knew that I had a wife. I did not open my home to let the world see the skeleton in it. At the same time I took no especial pains to conceal the fact of my wife's existence. But please believe this, Miss

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Vaughan, I have done everything I could for her comfort—I would have done anything in my power to make her happy.”

He paused, but she did not speak.

“I met you. I was interested in you because of what Zett had told me, and when I knew you, I loved you. On my honor, I tried hard to go away from Felstead. Day after day I promised myself to see you only once more and then leave you. I did not go. I could not. I saw my danger, and I was fool enough to believe myself strong enough to resist it. You know how I failed.”

Still she did not speak. Her nervous fingers unclasped once and then clasped again. That was all.

“That night was a vigil to me. I realized what I had done. I wrote to you telling you the whole story as I have told you now. I intended to send that letter to you, but with morning that seemed cowardly. I made up my mind to tell you my history. I went to the farm only to find that you had gone. In my desperation I told Robin Mackenzie the truth when he questioned me, and he requested me never to enter his gate again. I never have. I gave him the letter to send to you.”

“He never sent it,” said Olive.

“He told me they had destroyed your letters, but at the first opportunity he would let you have it,” Densham answered. “I thought by what Zett said last night you had not received it. I went back to the Hall, Miss Vaughan, determined to come to London to find you and tell you the truth. As I entered the house my man met me, and told me that my wife had had an accident. In one of her fits she had rushed from her room, and in struggling with the nurse, who tried to stop her, she fell down the stairs. For weeks she lay between life and death. I could not leave the Hall. I hoped day after day to hear from you. No letter came. I could do nothing. All the village by this time knew about my wife, and knew of her—her disease. I tried to do my duty to her honestly.

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In one way at least I succeeded. She woke out of a deep sleep one night when I was by her bedside. The nurse had gone to lie down. She told me that she was sorry for all she had made me suffer, and I comforted her, and kissed her for the first time for months. Still with her hand in mine she went to sleep again. Into her face there came the looks I had first known. She was again the girl I had prided myself upon rescuing from the streets that night so long ago."

"And she is quite cured. I am glad," said Olive.

"Quite cured!" Densham answered. "She did not wake again. When the dawn came, my wife was dead."

Olive rose from her chair and stood by the mantelpiece. There were tears in her eyes.

"As soon as I could I came to London," Densham went on. "I asked Overton about you. For days I have been trying to find you. Last night I saw Zett. He told me where you were."

"Did you tell Edward Overton you were married?"

"No. He found out. Probably he went to Felstead to find out. Believe me, if he has said anything else against me it is untrue. As God shall judge me, you know the worst of me."

There was a pause.

Suddenly Olive turned to him and said passionately:

"Oh, why—why did you deceive me? I looked up to you as a man so far above all other men. I did not want your love, not at first, only you made me want it; and that night—ah, it's too horrible to think of now—that night I felt that there was no other woman in the world so happy as I was. My happiness made me afraid. I was nobody; I had come from the most sordid surroundings. I had a voice. Mr. Tennant heard me sing at a factory-girls' club, and showed me the way to fame. Home was no home to me. I never knew what love meant. My father is as bad as

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bad can be, and to escape from it all I let Mr. Tenant and that—that scoundrel help me. In my new happiness I was afraid to tell you all this—afraid that you would love me less when you knew it. I wanted to hold my happiness tight to me for a little while before I lost it. If you really loved me, you would come to me, I said. I looked for you every day, for a letter by every post. And all the time you had deceived me, lied to me. How could you? How could you?"

Her lips trembled. She covered her face with her hands, and a sob shook her.

"I did not lie to you," he said. "I loved you."

"Loved me!" she exclaimed, with a little hysterical laugh. "Had you no thought for me? You knew that I had no right to love you. Because you loved me, as you call it, you put me in the position of a bad woman. Do you not understand that? You let me love you, and you had a wife. It was an outrage—a mean, cowardly outrage."

"I know. I saw the full measure of my offense after I left you that night. I deserve all your anger, all your contempt. I have no excuse to offer except my love."

"Such love is worthless," she said.

"It had no thought of evil in it. On my honor as—. How can I convince you?" he said desperately. "In your eyes I have not a rag of reputation to swear by. I humbly ask you to believe that I spoke only the truth from my soul when I said I loved you. I do not wish to plead the sorrow of my life, the humiliation of it, in palliation of my offense; but when my life seemed darkest you came into it, and I forgot everything in the sudden and exquisite light you brought to me. If you cannot pardon, at least you can pity me."

"Pity you! It is I who am to be pitied," she returned. "I placed implicit trust in you. I would have guaranteed your honor with my own, with my own good name, with my own womanhood. Can you

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realize what that means? Then remember what you have done, by your deception. You have torn from me my faith, my trust. I am left a skeptical woman, believing in no genuine friendship, believing in no man's honor. Oh, it is I who am to be pitied."

"Olive, Olive, for Heaven's sake don't madden me," said Densham passionately. "Don't force the knowledge of what I have lost upon me. I set out so bravely to do my duty, I have failed so utterly, surely there is some pity for my miserable failure. I have found my happiness only to lose it. Now I know what life held in store for me—a great love that comes to few men, even the most deserving. You confess it even though it has turned to contempt. If only I had waited a little while."

She did not answer him. She stood leaning against the mantelpiece, her face turned from him.

"Will you forgive me?" he said. "Is it too late?"

"It is too late," she answered. "In time I may forgive. Unfortunately I can never forget. I do not want to make it harder for you, and perhaps I do pity you. You have ruined two lives, Victor—mine and yours."

"Olive, are you sure it is too late? I love you. To the last breath I draw, I shall love you. I am in your hands. I will do as you command. Let me be your protector. Give me the right to shelter you, to stand between you and all the world. Except in name I will be nothing more than your protector. I will make no demands on your love. Before the world we shall be man and wife, but alone you shall only know that you have a slave to do your bidding, whether it be hard or light. I will never speak to you of love—my lips shall never touch yours unless you wish it. All the privileges which a husband may claim I renounce to your will; only let me be near you."

There was a long silence. In the woman's heart love and pride strove for the mastery. Love told her that the man worshiped her, that for her sake he was willing to give all. Pride reminded her that he

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spoke of love when he had no right to speak—warned her of the folly of trusting him now.

“Am I to hope, Olive?” whispered Densham.

“It is too late,” she said.

Densham stood for a moment as though he did not realize the full meaning of the words. He passed his hand wearily across his eyes and sighed. Then he took his hat.

“Good-by. Will you shake hands?”

A moment's hesitation, and then she put hers into his.

“Although I pass out of your life, Miss Vaughan, there is one thing you cannot take from me—the memory of you. If a day should come when I can be of service to you, believe me I will. You need not see me. Zett would carry a message. What I could do would be only some little reparation for the wrong I have done. I shall always love you—you cannot prevent my doing that. I shall carry that love with me to the end, and in the light of it I will endeavor to be a better man. Good-by, and God keep you.”

He was gone. The room door closed behind him. A pause, then the front door closed.

“Victor! Victor!”

She sank into a chair and sobbed as if her heart would break. She had sent him away, never to see him again. She had renounced the one great love in her life. She had voluntarily raised the barrier between her and happiness. It was her duty, her duty to herself, but how terribly hard it was.

The room door opened quietly and a woman stole in. Olive did not notice, or thought it was only the servant, until a gentle yet firm hand was laid upon her shoulder.

“My dear, you are in trouble.”

Olive looked up into a face which was more than the face of a friend; it was the face of a mother—tears in her eyes.

“You know who I am—Mrs. Tennant. Gilbert has told me. I want to help you.”

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Something in the gentle touch, in the soft voice, went straight to the girl's heart.

"It is very good of you—very good."

"My dear, I am making a late repentance," said Mrs. Tennant. "My old-fashioned bringing-up must be my excuse. Gilbert wanted me long ago to be your friend, and I held back because, my dear, because you were an actress. To my narrow-minded views actresses were dangerous. Forgive me, and let me help you. Let me be your elder sister, will you?"

"Be my friend," said the girl, letting her head rest on Mrs. Tennant's shoulder. "I am in sore need of a friend."

"I mean to be," was the answer. "And I am going to begin by scolding you. You spoke unjustly to my husband; he didn't deserve it."

"I am sorry; I was angry."

"And no wonder. It is difficult to make Gilbert believe evil of anybody. That scoundrel Overton deceived him, although he never deceived me. I never trusted the man!"

"I did not trust him," said Olive; "but I did not think him capable of——"

"He's capable of anything and everything, my dear. This house is his—you must not stay in it."

"No; I shall go as soon as possible."

"You are going to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes; at once. You are coming home with me until you find a new home. Let the servant pack everything that belongs to you, and don't be beholden to that villain a moment longer."

The girl dried her eyes.

"You will really take me in, just for a little while."

"Gladly."

Olive kissed her.

"I never knew my mother, Mrs. Tennant, I never had a sister. Now I have indeed found a real friend."

So had Mrs. Tennant, although she did not realize it then.

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. MACKENZIE'S OPINION

DURING the time that Olive stayed with the Tennants the new piece was produced, and was not an unqualified success. The tunefulness and genuine fun of "The Girl of Bagdad" had led the public to expect great things of its successor which were not realized, and had it not been for Olive Vaughan the piece would not have run as long as it did. For her it was a triumph, with the immediate result that offers of engagements were plentiful.

The excitement of success, her new existence in the Tennants' home, were of infinite benefit to Olive at this time. She had little leisure to brood over her trouble, for Mavis and Frank made a demand upon all the spare hours she had. They had accepted her at once as a very valuable addition to the home. She became Olive before the end of the first week, and Mrs. Tennant's injunction to them not to worry Miss Vaughan was met with astonished laughter and surprise.

"Why, mother darling, she's very fond of us," said Mavis. "There's nothing she likes better than helping me to make my doll's clothes. She told me so."

"And she's just awfully good at making sails for boats," said Frank. "She knows how they ought to go even better than you, mother. I think I shall marry Olive when I'm big enough."

The children brought an interest into Olive's life which she had never known before. She delighted in them, delighted in the love they gave her, and there was nothing in the world she would not have done for either of them. It was indeed a new existence she had

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entered upon. In it she had some one to love, some one to love her. Her thoughts, her ambitions were no longer centered solely upon herself. She was able to forget herself, able to be her real self without standing constantly on the defensive.

She had apologized to Gilbert Tennant the night she had come home with his wife. He had begged her at once to say no more about it, but a certain constraint between them remained. She was always Miss Vaughan, he was always Mr. Tennant. The note of good comradeship which had been the basis of their friendship was there no longer. Gilbert, almost unconsciously, treated her differently. The difference was on his side, not on hers. She talked of herself to him, just as she had always done; but the advice he gave was given rather in a business spirit, than in a friendly one as formerly. Probably he would have been surprised had anyone pointed out the difference to him, would have declared that he was the same as he always had been; but it was not so, and Olive knew it. She blamed herself. In her anger she had spoken unjustly, and she hardly wondered that Gilbert Tennant should show some resentment.

"What am I to do about these offers of engagements?" she asked, going into Gilbert's den one morning. "I had another by post this morning. It is quite evident that the new piece is not in for a long run, and I do not want to be out of an engagement."

"No. Some of them are exceedingly good offers too."

"Is there any chance of my being offered the part in your play?"

"I was talking to Mather about it yesterday," said Gilbert. "I have urged your claims to the utmost, and I know he thinks a great deal of your powers. He has offered the part to Miss Berry, and yesterday he had not received her answer."

"She is almost certain to take it," said Olive.

"I don't know. She and Mather have had a good many rows at various times, and if she thinks she can

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put him in a hole, I should not be surprised if she refused. I sincerely hope she will."

"You want to give me a chance?"

"Yes; I want to do that, and I want my play to have the best interpretation possible. You were in my mind when I wrote it. I believe you would play the part as nobody else could."

"I shall wait until I know definitely," said Olive. "I want that part more than I ever wanted anything in my life. If I get it, I will succeed for your sake. You have been very good to me, Mr. Tennant. I should like to do something to repay you."

"My dear Miss Vaughan, you have really repaid me already for anything I have done. I had a letter from Overton this morning."

"About me? May I see it?"

"I destroyed it."

"You did not wish me to see it?"

"No. He wanted to know if you had decided to give up the house in Harmony Road; at least that is what he meant. He put it rather differently."

"I understand," said Olive. "It was rather unpleasant from your point of view."

"It was the letter of a scoundrel, Miss Vaughan," Tennant answered. "I would rather say no more about it. Of course I shall take no notice of it."

The new piece came to an end rather abruptly. The management had done all in its power to bolster it up, but, in spite of Olive Vaughan, the public refused to support it. The enforced idleness troubled Olive a great deal. With leisure to think, she became depressed. Her worries became magnified. She could not help looking at them through strong glasses.

"I must leave here," she said to herself. "A great deal more was in that letter than Mr. Tennant said, or he would not have destroyed it so carefully. And I must accept another engagement, or my little store of money will soon go. As it is, I am quite sure I do not pay Mrs. Tennant enough for having me here. I'll give Mather a week. If he doesn't make up his

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mind in that time, I must give up all hope of that part."

For these days she gave herself up to the children. She tried, by being interested in their small concerns, to forget her own worries, but she only partially succeeded. Overton's letter had fallen like a shell into her new existence. It proved that she had in him an implacable enemy—an enemy whose lies must hurt her to some extent. Had she been wise to refuse the protection Victor Densham had offered her? Yes, she told herself, and was angry when her heart refused to believe it. It was not his protection she wanted—it was his love. She had voluntarily surrendered it—had told him that such love as his was worthless. It could never be hers now. Victor was not the man to ask again. And if he did, she felt that she would give him the same answer. Yet inconsistently she treasured his memory.

A sudden thought came to her. The letter he had written to her and left with Robin Mackenzie. Why should she not have it?

She got up on the fourth day determined to have it.

Robin Mackenzie had thrown down his hat and riding whip, and had just declared his ability to make short work of whatever amount of food and drink his wife set before him, when a shadow darkened the door and a voice said:

"May I come in?"

"It's the lass!" cried Robin.

"Miss Vaughan!" said his wife, almost putting the saucepan she had just taken from the fire on to the tablecloth, so great was her hurry to have a free hand to welcome her guest.

"You haven't got rid of me altogether, you see," Olive said.

"And ye're just in time for a bit of dinner," said Robin, pulling a chair to the table for her. "Take off your hat, lass."

"I'd have had a nicer dinner if I'd known you were coming," said Mrs. Mackenzie. "This is such a scrap

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day with us—nothing but some cold chicken and a stew, and not too much of either.”

“It’s pot luck, Jane; don’t you worry. When you can make anyone welcome to pot luck and they’re pleased to take it, you can reckon you’re all friends together. That’s true, ain’t it, lass? And how are you prospering? Still singing? You’re not looking all you ought to.”

“The child’s hungry, Robin. Wait a bit.”

“You’ve got no luggage, lass.”

“I have not come to stay. I am going back to London to-night.”

“Stay to-night and go back to-morrow comfortable,” urged Mrs. Mackenzie.

“And what do you think my friends would say?”

“Telegraph them,” said Robin. “Only saxpence, and I’ll pay it.”

“Thank you; but I must go back. This is quite like old times.”

“Yes,” said Robin; but somehow the fact did not seem to give him satisfaction. He went on with his dinner in silence.

“I thought you would have written to us,” said Mrs. Mackenzie presently.

“I really ought to have done; but——”

“Never mind, lass; there were reasons, I know,” said Robin.

“Yes; there were reasons. You have a letter for me, Mr. Mackenzie?”

“Then you have seen him?”

“Yes.”

“And he has told you everything?”

“Everything, even to the fact that you requested him not to come here again.”

Robin went to a drawer and got the letter.

“There it is, lass. We should have sent it, if we’d known where to send it to. So he told you everything? Did it hurt you much, lass?”

“That’s no business of ours, Robin,” said Mrs. Mackenzie.

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"It was a surprise, and it pained me," said Olive. "I need make no secret of that. Mr. Densham explained everything to me, and I think he is to be pitied. You were a little hard on him, Mr. Mackenzie."

"I didn't think so then, and I don't think so now; but I'm inclined to pity him too; and he has grit in him, that's certain."

Olive put the letter in her pocket unopened.

"When you see him again, Mr. Mackenzie, I wish you would speak to him. I should not like him to think that I had asked you to do so, but I wish you would. It would put heart into him; and a man who has suffered and—sinned, is helped by the shake of an honest man's hand."

"You don't bear malice, lass; I'll do it."

"Thank you," Olive said.

"I very nearly did it the last time I saw him, only I thought he might refuse."

"Is he in Felstead now?"

"No; he left the day after his wife's funeral, and has not been back. You knew his wife was dead?"

"He told me so."

"There was a great sensation when the village learned that he had a wife. I heard a good deal about him during the time his wife was ill. He hardly ever left her, and if care and devotion could have saved her, she would not have died. He walked back to the Hall after the funeral. That was the last time I saw him."

"Poor fellow!" said Olive quietly.

"Aye, it's the sinners get most pity in this world," said Mrs. Mackenzie; "and they don't deserve it. If you spend years raking together a bed of thistles, you ought not to expect to rest on down. But the silly world would change it to down if it could."

"Jane's very much against him, lass," said Robin.

"I don't hold with whitewashing people. Forgive them if you like, but——"

"Keep them the other side of the gate," Robin suggested.

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"Exactly. There's plenty of folks deserving of pity without wandering after all the ne'er-do-wells to waste it on."

"I do not think Mr. Densham is a ne'er-do-well," said Olive. "He has suffered, and has paid the price."

"That's just," Mrs. Mackenzie answered.

"And he has paid it bravely."

"Men go to the scaffold bravely, Miss Vaughan; they're none the less criminals."

"Oh, that's very hard on Mr. Densham."

"Is it? Supposing you had been like some girls; supposing you had allowed yourself to fall desperately in love with him; supposing your whole life were wrapped up in him—wouldn't the deceit he practiced ruin your life? That side of the question never occurred to him. Because you happen to be sensible, his crime is not lessened."

"And if I did love him as you say, Mrs. Mackenzie, and knowing all, can still forgive and pity?"

"Did you, child?"

"Jane, this is no business of ours," said Robin, reproving his wife in her own words.

"That's true. I'm a troublesome old woman, Miss Vaughan. Maybe it's because I fancy my little girl might have been something like you."

"I did not know you——"

"We don't talk of her much, Robin and me. Only when we're sitting before the fire sometimes, and haven't spoken for a while, we look at each other, and we know what the other's been thinking about. She was just three and a half—and God wanted her."

Olive went up to Mrs. Mackenzie and kissed her.

Mrs. Mackenzie drew her gently across the room, and opened a great family Bible which stood on a table there. It opened easily at a certain place.

"That's a curl of hers," she said. "Yours must have been much like that when you were her age. She'll be twenty-seven come next Saturday."

"I wish you could be here, lass, then," said Robin,

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who had followed and stood behind them. "We always keep her birthday—not sadly, you know. We make it a holiday, and only what's necessary is done on the farm that day. There isn't a man on the place who doesn't know the lass's birthday."

"We always give them a supper in the barn," said Mrs. Mackenzie. "We began it when she was one year old, and we've done it ever since. Robin always gives me something new to wear that day, and we always sit up a little later and think about her."

"The bairn's in good keeping, Jane," said Robin stoutly, but suddenly conscious of tears in his eyes. "And whether she is still as we remember her, or grown up like the lass here, she won't forget us. We'll see a couple o' arms stretched out to us, Jane, and we'll know right enough—we'll know."

Going back to town Olive had a compartment to herself, and she read Victor's letter—read it many times. She pitied him, pitied herself more than ever. "Some day, my dearest, you may be happy in the love of a good man; perhaps, knowing your own happiness, you may spare one tender thought for a wretch who loved you so well that he forgot his honor."

"Happy!" she said. "I shall never be really happy, Victor. You have robbed me of that. But the tender thought, that is yours. It will come to you every day. Oh, Victor, why did you deceive me? How different it might have been now!"

Gilbert Tennant came out of his den as she entered the house, a letter in his hand.

"For you," he said, "from Mather."

She opened it quickly.

"He offers me the part; rehearsals to commence forthwith," and she gave him the letter to read.

"The great actress in—" He paused.

"In Gilbert Tennant's masterpiece," she said.

"That is what you prophesied, you know."

"And if the play fails?"

"Courage! Courage! It will not fail. I shall stand at the wings to see your triumph, and there

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will be no one there who will rejoice more than I shall."

"I have worked for it, hungered for it, for years," said Gilbert. "Not for myself, but for those who are dear to me. My foot is on the threshold at last, and yet—something seems to bar my entrance. I wonder what it is?"

"Want of a good night's rest for a tired brain, Mr. Tennant," Olive answered.

"That does not seem to be the reason," said Gilbert quietly.

And with morning he still wondered.

CHAPTER XXIV

GILBERT TENNANT'S MASTERPIECE

HEARING of a small furnished flat to be let in Kensington, Olive took it.

"It is so good of you to have had me here," she said to Mrs. Tennant; "but of course I must not impose upon your kindness."

"I am sure we do not want you to go."

"But I must. You will not admit it, I know, but having me in the house is not like having the house to yourselves. Besides, I have this opportunity of getting a flat cheaply, and I have some hard work before me. We have got to make a tremendous success of the new play. I am absolutely pledged to it."

Those who lived in the neighborhood called it Kensington; those whose business in the locality made them more precise declared that it was West Brompton. Olive did not mind which it was called, as the flat was pleasant and the rent reasonable. It was comfortably furnished, and Olive had not been there long before the rooms took some of her individuality. It was a new and pleasant experience to have a home entirely of her own. She began to wonder how she had lived in the house with the lamp in Harmony Road so long.

The Tennants were her first visitors. She made a little feast for them, her house-warming, at which the children were present, and from that time forward they were constant visitors at the little flat in Kensington. It was a second home to Mavis and Frank; and Mrs. Tennant, who seldom left her home to go anywhere, found plenty of time to visit Olive Vaughan. A very real friendship sprang up between

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the two women—a friendship which adversity, if it came to either one or the other of them, would only strengthen.

It happened that when Zett paid his first visit to the flat, the Tennants were there. He had not been to see Olive while she was living with them in Harmony Road. At first he was inclined to be shy with the children. Perhaps the sight of their straight limbs was the cause, or it may have been the expectancy of being jeered at by them. But the shyness did not last long. Mavis soon put that to flight by taking him under her wing in a motherly little fashion, and when Frank discovered that he knew how to tie all sorts of strange knots, and could spin any kind of top, and do all kinds of tricks with them too, he was quite satisfied with his new acquaintance.

“Do you like dolls?” inquired Mavis.

“Yes. Down near where I live there’s a shop full on ’em—dolls as big as me, some on ’em.”

“I should like a doll like that.”

“Wish I could get you one, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I ain’t got no money,” answered Zett.

“That must be very awkward sometimes, isn’t it?” said Mavis.

“I’ve got used to it. You’ve never been like what I am. You’ve got a father, an’ a mother, an’ all that. I ain’t.”

“You are an orphan?”

“Am I?”

“Yes; people who haven’t got fathers and mothers are. I’m very sorry for you.”

“Don’t you trouble about me. I get along.”

“You mustn’t worry Zett, Mavis,” said Olive.

“He’s very much older than you are, you know.”

“I don’t think he looks it. You’re not very much bigger, are you?”

Zett laughed; it was the most light-hearted laugh Olive had ever heard from him.

“I’m made a little different, that’s why,” he said;

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"but you makes me nearly forget it. I think I'm more a child now than I've ever been."

He said the same to Olive after the Tennants had left.

"I ain't often been real happy like what I've been to-day. I hope I'll see the little 'un again."

"You are sure to, Zett, if you come to see me."

"I'll do that. I feel more at home here than I did at the other place. What made you leave?"

"I thought it better."

"Friends got tired, eh?"

"Mr. Tennant was one of them, you remember," Olive answered. "It does not look as though he had got tired of me, does it?"

It may have been something in Olive's manner which made Zett look at her fixedly for a few moments.

"It was the other one, was it?" he said; "and he was the one what did the paying."

Olive nodded.

"And why did he chuck it?"

"Let it be, Zett, it is done with."

"Is it? There ain't no certainty about that. I never liked the look o' him. He wanted something from you, did he?"

"He insulted me, Zett, but it is past. That is why I left Harmony Road. Edward Overton will not trouble me any more."

"He's the sort as would tell lies about you if he couldn't do nothing else. If I hears 'em I'll——"

"Hush, Zett. He has nothing more to do with me."

Zett was silent, but Overton's name took a lodging in his brains. It was to be remembered.

"Have you seen my friend Mr. Densham again?" he asked presently.

"No."

"Didn't you like him?"

"Yes."

"But not as much as I thought you would?"

"Perhaps he doesn't care for dancers and singers,

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Zett. Didn't you say he was not the kind of man to run after such people?"

"Maybe I did. But he didn't come to see you because you were a singer—he came because I asked him."

"Have you seen him since?"

"Once in a cab, with a portmanty on top. He's gone out o' London maybe. You'll like him more when you see him again."

"Perhaps so, Zett."

"I'll come along with him next time. That'll make things a bit easier. He felt a kind o' strange meeting you for a first time. I should myself. You'll like him afore you've done with him."

Olive was angry with herself for feeling a keen pleasure in talking about Victor Densham. He had passed out of her life. He had taken some of hers with him, and forever he must keep that. He had found her one woman—he had left her another. She could hardly define the difference. She only knew that she felt more alone than she did, even before she knew him. There were moments when she longed to call him back to her. Had he come to her then she would have forgiven him—would easily have found excuses for him. But these moments were always followed by a time when she exercised a strict discipline over herself—when she forced herself to think as hardly of Victor Densham as he deserved.

Gilbert Tennant's play was put into rehearsal even sooner than had been expected. Mather's last production, although written by the foremost dramatist of the day, had not proved a success. Olive's promotion to leading lady at the St. George's had caused considerable surprise and not a little jealousy. Those who thought they ought to have occupied the position did not scruple to declare that it was entirely due to somebody behind her, whom Mather could not afford to offend, and the stories which Overton had put in circulation were remembered again. Still, even her most bitter enemies were forced to admit that the part

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suiting her when they saw her at rehearsals. Gilbert himself said little. He watched the woman he had drawn take shape in Olive's hands. The reality, as she moved in the little world he had placed her in, was greater even than he had conceived her. The words he had written took a deeper, a more intense meaning, when Olive spoke them, and he felt that the end of the third act was one of the most dramatic he had ever seen. It was not his genius, it was hers.

"You were right, Tennant," Mather said. "She is a great actress. She will make your play. Set to work, my boy, and be ready to take the tide at the flood. You will have half the managers in London after you the day after this is produced."

"I feel like a man of one play, Mather," was the answer. "I haven't a single idea for another."

"The ideas will come. Wait until you step on to hear the enthusiastic applause. There is no such encouragement as that. I remember the first 'call' I ever received. I have never forgotten it. Every doubt of myself, of my own powers, vanished into thin air. I was the happiest man in the world at that moment."

Gilbert smiled and went home slowly. Success was to be his at last—every one told him so; and yet his hands seemed to fail to grasp it. It was just before him, yet just out of his reach. There were only three days now before the night—the night which was to be the greatest he had ever known. He was excited for a little while, and then the most terrible depression seized him, and held him until he shivered. He told himself that he had caught a chill at the theater. That accounted for his weariness and the hard work it was to drag along. He would be all right after a night's rest. He must be. A great poster on a hoarding at the top of Harmony Road, setting forth the production of "A Woman's Self, by Gilbert Tennant," convinced him of this fact. It was no time to be ill. Half way down the road he stumbled. He would have fallen had he not caught hold of the railings. He

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stood for a moment only partially conscious of where he was. Then he went slowly on again.

Mrs. Tennant had watched his coming. She went to the door to meet him, and saw at once that he was not his usual self.

"What is the matter, Gilbert?"

"I—I think I've got a chill—a touch of influenza, perhaps—I don't know. I'm as cold as ice."

She touched him, and his skin was burning.

"You have been overdoing it lately," she said. "You had better go and get into bed."

"I think I will. I shall be all right in the morning."

Mrs. Tennant was never without an assortment of pills and powders in the house, and above all a clinical thermometer. Gilbert had laughed at her scores of times and called her a quack doctor. He smiled at her now when she insisted on taking his temperature, but he submitted.

"I shall be all right in the morning;" and then, as she took the thermometer to the window, he asked, "What is it—four hundred point two?"

"Not quite so bad as that," she answered.

It was good to hear him joke. His temperature was so high that she was very anxious.

Late that night she sent for the doctor. Gilbert was rather angry. There was nothing much the matter with him. He had only got a little cold. A night's rest would do him worlds of good.

"Doctor or no doctor, I must be in town on Thursday evening. I ought to go up to-morrow morning, but I dare say they can get on without me for once."

"We shall see," said the doctor.

Gilbert was delirious most of the night, and morning found him worse.

After rehearsal that day Olive came to Harmony Road. Mrs. Tennant met her with a grave face.

"Gilbert is very ill," she said; "I had the doctor late last night, and he has been twice this morning."

"Do you mean dangerously ill?"

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"Yes, dear, the doctor makes no secret of it."

"I cannot see him?"

"I am sure you had better not. He was delirious all night, and although this morning he was a little calmer, he is worse again now. He talks of nothing but the play, and you, and Thursday. The doctor insisted on my having a nurse. She came only an hour ago," and Mrs. Tennant broke down.

Olive took her in her arms.

"Come, Mary dear, you must not give way like this. Gilbert is a strong man. He will pull through. He has been so busy with the play, it is only natural he should talk about it, and of course Thursday night is engraven on his brain. If he talked of things in which he was not really interested it would be worse, wouldn't it?"

"He could not be worse, Olive, I am afraid."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing. There is nothing to be done. That is the hard part of it."

"Can I take the children home with me?" said Olive.

"Oh, no. It is a relief to me to have to look after them."

"Have you thought of having further advice—a specialist from town?"

"The doctor says there is no need for that, and I have every confidence in him."

"Because, don't mind the cost," Olive went on. "Money does not matter in a case like this. If you haven't sufficient in the house, I can let you have what you want."

"There is nothing to be done—only to wait."

Olive stayed until late, doing all in her power to comfort Mrs. Tennant. As she was going she turned suddenly—

"We are real friends, and you will let me do anything I can?"

"You know I will."

"Then how about money?"

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"I have enough."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so."

"Gilbert never expected such sudden illness, and of course could make no preparation. I have some with me. Take it. Gilbert will repay me presently."

"I am sure I shall not want it."

"You never know. Far better to have too much than too little."

"It is very sweet and thoughtful of you, Olive."

"You would do exactly the same for me," was the answer.

All that night, and the next day, Gilbert tossed upon his bed, talking incessantly about his play, talking familiarly of the characters in it as though they were men and women he had known all his life.

At six o'clock on Thursday evening he awoke from a troubled sleep.

"I must get up," he said. "I must be there to see my play."

Half a dozen times he tried to get out of bed, and it took all his wife's and the nurse's strength to prevent him. After the doctor had been he became quieter and dozed a little.

Suddenly he roused up.

"Mary!"

"Yes, dear." She was beside him in a moment, her cool hand upon his forehead.

"What time is it?"

"Ten minutes past nine."

"The first act must be nearly over."

"Yes, dear. We shall hear all about it to-morrow."

Gilbert shook his head.

"You will," he said quietly; "I shall not. Mary, I'm going to leave you, dear. I can't tell you why I know it, but I do. You'll forgive me all the trouble I've been to you, won't you? I don't think I ought to have married. I've always been such a selfish fellow. I've been very happy, Mary, with you, and until now, now that I've been lying here, it's never oc-

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curred to me how unhappy I must often have made you."

"Never, Gilbert. You have been the best and dearest of husbands. My darling, don't you know that I love you? You must not talk about leaving me, Gilbert. You are really better to-night."

He smiled a little and dozed again, his wife's hand in his. His mind went back to the play.

"I'm glad I didn't make Lady Chalmers forgive her husband. It would have spoiled the play," he said.

"Yes, dear."

He fell into a troubled sleep again.

"What is the time?" he asked suddenly, starting up in bed.

"Nearly ten; but you must lie down, Gilbert."

"I must get up. I shall have time to get there. If they call for the author I must be there."

It was with difficulty they kept him in bed.

"It's that blackguard Overton's doing, you know. He told all the lies about her, said I was in love with her too, and that's why she came to live here. Just go and be a friend to her, Mary; that's a dear girl. That's the end of the third act. I knew it would go well. Listen!"

There was perfect silence in the room save for the ticking of the clock.

"Listen! Are they calling for me already?"

"Gilbert!"

"I thought I was called for, but of course it couldn't be. There's the fourth act yet."

Mrs. Tennant sat beside him watching his every movement. For a long time he lay quiet, with his eyes closed.

"Mary!"

"Dearest!"

"That's what he said, that I was in love with her, and that's why she came here. I destroyed the letter. You know it wasn't true."

"Yes, Gilbert."

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"I didn't have my romp with the children to-night, did I?"

"No, dearest."

"Strange I should have forgotten that, isn't it? To-morrow—we'll have it to-morrow. Is the fourth act over yet?"

"Not yet."

"I think they'll call for me, Mary; then, my dear, better times—better times."

A first night at the St. George's was always a society function. All the reserved seats were booked long in advance, and people began to gather at the pit door long before noon. The house was almost full when Victor Densham went to his stall. He had not come to see the play—he had come to see Olive Vaughan. Not the actress, but the woman he loved. He looked at the programme carelessly. That the first act took place in Sir Godfrey's drawing-room, and the third in the orchard of the Manor Farm, did not interest him, nor was he conscious of any pleasurable excitement because Mr. Mather, one of the best actors of the day, was playing Sir Godfrey Chalmers. It was the last name in the caste which alone interested him. He read it over and over again—"And Lady Chalmers, Miss Olive Vaughan."

The orchestra played a selection from "Lohengrin." Then the lights in the auditorium were lowered and the curtain went up.

Although Densham had not come to see the play, it held him. There was no gainsaying its power. Olive's first entrance was not until late in the first act. She entered a drawing-room full of people, Sir Godfrey's young wife, a woman whom, until she became Lady Chalmers, the world of society had not known. She came to conquer, to be admired, to be tempted, and withal to stand. This was the keynote of the play. In her mimic world she was greeted with raised eyeglasses and with jealousy. By the real world, the audience, she was welcomed with more ap-

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plause than even Mather himself. Much was expected of her, and this was her encouragement. For the first few moments she showed perhaps a little nervousness, but it soon passed. To the end she held her audience spellbound. Hardened critics forgot they were on business. A new Bernhardt, one of them said. It's a great play, too, said another. The third act brought down the house, and the curtain was raised half a dozen times at least upon Mather and Olive Vaughan before the applause died down. The fourth act, so often a snare to the dramatist, set a final seal on the excellence of the play and the greatness of the actress. Logically the play could only have one ending, unhappiness, and the author was wise enough to let it end so. Lady Chalmers forgave her husband the wrong he had done her, but she could not forget. So she passed out of his life, and the curtain came down upon the husband looking toward the door which his wife had just closed behind her. The intensity with which the actress uttered her final words, and the dignity of her exit, touched the sublime, and the curtain came down in silence. For the space of a minute there was no sound of movement or applause in the house. Then it came like a thunder roar. Over and over again the curtain rolled up and down, Mather leading Olive Vaughan to the footlights and leaving her there, recognizing that it was her triumph. She bowed her acknowledgments with a smiling face, but her heart was heavy for the man who could not be there to take his share of that ovation. His words rang in her ears above all the tumult of that applauding crowd—"The great actress in Gilbert Tennant's masterpiece."

It came presently—a renewed roar, a loud-shouted demand from stalls to gallery.

"Author—Author—Tennant—Author, Gilbert Tennant!"

Once more the curtain went up slowly, and Mather came forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said; "three days ago

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the author was taken ill, not seriously, it was hoped. I sent a messenger to his house to-night, hoping that he might be able to be with us. My messenger has just returned. I am deeply grieved to tell you that Gilbert Tennant died half an hour ago."

There was a sudden hush in the house, and slowly the curtain came down.

CHAPTER XXV

ZETT SQUANDERS HIS MONEY ON A DOLL

JACOB FARROW sat dozing behind the counter in his shop off the Waterloo Road. His hat adorned the head of the Prime Minister, and the ashes from his pipe had fallen upon his greasy waistcoat. He was dirtier than ever, and it was evident that he had not been sober last night, possibly not for many nights past. The shop, too, never remarkable for cleanliness, was dirtier than formerly, and the figures and musty garments standing and lying about were in the last stages of dilapidation. Had anyone opened the shop door with the intention of making a purchase, he probably would have beaten a hasty retreat on catching sight of the interior and of the proprietor. In these days the bell on the door seldom jangled except when Jacob Farrow went out and came in; but it had been fixed there in the days when a customer did occasionally come, and no one had taken the trouble to remove it. The proprietor did not expect it to ring.

Jacob Farrow roused up presently and swore, apparently at the Prime Minister, who, in the greasy hat and his own shabby garments, certainly looked a disreputable character. He refilled his pipe, lit it, and then shuffled into the back parlor. What little grace there had been in this room in former days had entirely disappeared. On the table were dirty plates and broken food, and a mass of empty bottles. Farrow did not take the trouble to wash up after his meals; he used all the plates and glasses he possessed, leaving the woman who came in once a week for a couple of hours to wash the lot. From a cupboard he took a bottle of gin and drank a greedy dose of it.

"Meat," he said.

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He took another drink.

"Pudding," he said; "better than fooling about cooking dinner."

He shuffled back to his chair behind the counter, swore at the disreputable Prime Minister again, stuck his pipe securely in the corner of his mouth, and promptly fell asleep.

Presently he started up in the very middle of a snore. The bell at the door jangled harshly, and a stranger stood in the entrance.

"Come in or go out, one or the other, can't you—only shut that infernal door."

The stranger came in and closed the door behind him.

"I am afraid I disturbed you. I didn't know you were asleep. It is a bad practice in business hours. Do you welcome all your customers in the same way?"

"Never have a customer now. Might as well put up the shutters."

"I should. You wouldn't get disturbed then."

"It's no joking matter."

"Business bad, eh?"

"Shocking. I can't make enough to buy decent food with."

Farrow spoke in a whining voice. He had observed that his visitor was well dressed, and thought he might arouse his compassion.

"It makes an honest man irritable sometimes—it do, indeed, sir. It made me speak to you as I did just now. I sell nothing, and there it is. I don't get enough to eat, and that's the solid truth."

"Nor drink?"

The stranger leaned against the counter and looked at him.

"Nor drink, as you say," Farrow answered. "I ain't got enough money even for that. If once in a while some friend stands me a glass, it gets into my head; I come home feeling as if I'd been drinking all day."

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"That is an economical way of getting drunk, at any rate."

"Drunk you call it! It ain't drink—it's empty stomach, that's what it is. If I was to die this minute, and they was to sit on me, they'd bring it in as death from starvation. Perhaps you've come to buy something. You shall have it cheap, I give you my word. Would you like the Prime Minister? That's a speaking likeness."

The stranger lit a cigarette. Proximity to Jacob Farrow was rather trying.

"Thanks, not to-day; but here's a sovereign. I've had a good lunch myself, and that puts me in an excellent temper."

"You're a gentleman."

"So I have always supposed. Haven't you any friends or relations to help you, Mr. Farrow?"

"Friends!" Farrow laughed. "When a man's hard up he never has any friends."

"Being hard up does not prevent him having relations."

"I had a daughter," said Farrow.

"Well, what has become of her?"

"I'd give ten quid to know."

"Put the money down, Mr. Farrow."

"If I had it," he added hastily; "if I had it."

The stranger laughed.

"I was wondering how you were going to manage. A man doesn't walk about with nothing in his stomach when he has ten pounds in his pocket."

"Anyway I'd give a bill at six months for the truth about her, and I'd meet that bill too."

"How?"

"Never mind. You put me in the way of finding my daughter, that's all."

"You must be very fond of her," said the stranger reflectively.

"Fond of her! Oh, yes, I'm mighty fond of her. I shouldn't be ruined like I am now if it wasn't for her. The last time I saw her she struck me—struck

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her old father, sir, who had never so much as had a wry word with her. I wasn't very well at the time, and she took me unawares. I fainted, and when I came round she was gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know, but I can guess. She was a beautiful woman, and they never starve, you know, unless they're fools."

"And you don't think your daughter was a fool?"

"She couldn't be, after the advice I'd given her. She pretended a lot, but I know. If I could find her, I'd make her pay for it, that's all."

"Like the amiable, kind-hearted father you are."

"You don't know what it is when a daughter runs away from you," said Farrow.

"No; but I've a shrewd suspicion that your daughter didn't run away for nothing. Come now, you were not much of a father to her, were you?"

"Yes, I was; always giving her advice."

"To go and sell herself and hand you the profits? Excellent advice. And because she took it, and left you out of the bargain, you are angry. She was a little smarter than you thought her, that is all. You ought to be proud of her."

"Well, I ain't," Farrow answered.

"You'd pay her out if you had the chance?"

"I would," said Farrow, with a chuckle. "The better her luck, the less she'd like me hanging about. She should pay well to keep me out of the way."

"Amiable father," said the stranger. "Supposing I could give you the chance?"

"A bill at six months for ten pounds," Farrow answered promptly.

"You're a damned ruffian, Farrow. The good nature that is in me prompts me to come round this counter and kick you, but fortunately for you I too have an account to settle with your charming daughter, and I know of no better way than letting her beast of a father know where she is."

"Then you won't want the bill?"

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"Let me tell you about your daughter to begin with. She is a great lady, petted by one half the world, envied by the other half. She is an actress, a famous actress, and her admirers are legion."

"Who the devil are you?" asked Farrow suddenly.

The stranger slowly took off his hat.

"You do not recognize me? Too much gin—gin is your particular vice, is it not?—has dimmed your perception, my friend. Do you not remember two gentlemen coming to see your daughter here at different times? I am one of them. We gave her her opportunity, which she was clever enough to take."

"I remember," Farrow answered. "Tell me where she is."

"She is now called Miss Olive Vaughan, and that is her address in Kensington. I expect she will pay you well to keep out of her way. I should go as you are if I were you. The more disreputable you look, the more anxious she will be to get rid of you. If you could go when you are half drunk, so much the better."

Farrow took up the paper and read the address.

"This is worth a lot of money to me," he said.

"Then give me your bill for ten pounds."

"You want the bill?"

"Certainly. It was your own suggestion, and I should like to make sure that your good nature does not step in and prevent you troubling your daughter."

"I haven't got a bill stamp."

"Don't lie, Farrow. Your business is lending money. Open that drawer under the counter there. You will find one."

"There is just one," said Farrow, opening the drawer. "I had forgotten it. Who is the bill to be made payable to?"

"Edward Overton, 312 Sloane Street. Be quick about it. Stale gin and rank tobacco make me sick."

Farrow wrote out the bill slowly, blotted it carefully, and then held it in his hand, examining it thoughtfully.

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"You're pretty free in blackguarding me," he said, looking at Overton. "How about you? You're playing a dirty game too, ain't you? What's my daughter got to do with you?"

"Is that the bill?" said Overton, holding out his hand for it.

"Come off the high horse a bit, Mr. Overton, and let us know where you come in. I'm her father, remember—what have you got to do with her?"

"I am not inclined to answer any questions," answered Overton. "If you do not give me the bill at once, my better nature will get the upper hand, and I shall warn your daughter against you. It will please me just as much to be a friend to her as an enemy."

"You're a deep 'un," said Farrow, with a smirk which was meant to be a laugh. "There's the bill. It suits me to clinch the bargain. In a different way you're as bad as I am, only you don't want people to know it, and I don't mind. I'd sooner have you on my side than against me, therefore there's the bill."

"Your good opinion of me is gratifying, Mr. Farrow," said Overton, putting the bill into his letter case. "If you succeed in paying off my debt against your daughter I may possibly tear up this piece of paper; if not, you shall see me in six months."

Farrow watched him go out of the shop, and stood looking at the door until the bell had ceased to ring.

"So, my dear Clara, my turn comes at last," he said, looking at the address Overton had given him. "'Olive Vaughan'—a good name, evidence of my good advice. Good advice is worth paying for, Olive Vaughan. We shall see."

He resumed his pipe, and was inclined to resume his doze, but business which he never expected roused him up again.

The bell jangled, and Zett came in.

"Get out," said Farrow.

But Zett came in, and closed the door after him.

"Why the devil don't you get out when you're told?"

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"Because I'm on business. You thought I'd come to see you. I ain't."

"None of your impudence, you——"

"Hold on, Mr. Farrow. You own this 'ere shop, don't you?"

"Yes, you——"

"And in a shop you sells things?"

"If you can."

"Very well then. I've come to buy."

Farrow took his hat from the head of the Prime Minister and put it on his own. He was too surprised to put his astonishment into words.

"I can take my custom elsewhere," said Zett; "only it's as well to deal with the local tradesmen if possible."

"Thank you, sir; and what can I do for your majesty—a new pair of legs, cut straight?"

"I want that doll in the window, the big 'un what's got no clothes on."

"Very like. A lot of folks would be glad to have that doll; but I don't give credit."

"You want the money?"

"I do."

"How much?"

"Ten shillings to you," sneered Farrow.

"Is that all? What would it be to anyone else—five bob?"

"Look here, you'd better go afore I come round and kick you out."

"Come round," said Zett calmly. "I shan't run. The last man what tried to kick me out ain't been discharged from the 'ospital yet."

"You young——"

"Touching that doll. Seven and a tanner did you say?"

"Ten shillings, money down."

"What! nothing taken off for ready?"

"Oh, go to the devil."

"When you've given me the doll."

"Where's your money?"

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"In my pocket."

"Let's look at it."

"Let's look at the doll first."

"Don't believe you've got a tanner, let alone the seven shillings," said Farrow.

"I thought it was only seven and six," said Zett.

"Get it out, Mr. Farrow, blow the dust off it, and put it in a clean piece of paper. Here's your money."

Zett held out his hand, disclosing fifteen sixpences.

"Who've you been robbing? Looks like a church collection."

"It's savings."

"And who might the doll be for, Mr. Zett?"

"You ain't forced to give that information when you go in and buy anythink."

Farrow got out the doll and rolled it up in a sheet of newspaper.

"Anythink extra for brown paper and a bit o' string?"

"Your pardon," said Farrow. "Didn't know you were walking, sir; thought you'd slip it under the carriage seat. Sure there's nothing else to-day? We do a very good line in straight legs."

"I prefer 'em crooked," answered Zett. "Straight 'uns are so common."

"I tell you what," said Farrow suddenly; "I'll give you this doll, and you can keep your money, if you'll tell me where Clara is?"

"I know of no such person."

"You're a liar; but there's your doll."

Zett took it and put his money on the counter.

"You're a very rude shopkeeper, but maybe you can't help it."

Farrow let him get half way toward the door.

"Do you happen to know such a person as Olive Vaughan?"

Zett stopped.

"An actress and a fine lady. Do you happen to know such a person?"

Zett did not answer.

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"Mr. Overton's a customer of mine. He's acquainted with her, I believe. We've been talking about her this afternoon. Getting quite a swell shop this, ain't it? First Mr. Overton, then you, and ready money too. I'll have to buy a safe to hold this lot," and he jingled the sixpences in his hand.

"What did Mr. Overton say?" asked Zett.

"Ah! we don't sell that kind of thing here."

"Don't you have nothing to do with him, Mr. Farrow. He's a wrong 'un."

"Is he?"

"Dead wrong."

"I shouldn't have thought it."

"You take my word, and a little bit of advice along with it. Overton and me ain't pals, nor anyone what knows him ain't a pal o' mine. See them fingers—they're bits o' steel, they are. Well, anyone who takes any notice o' what Overton says, and does as he wants 'em to, is like to feel them fingers round his throat—see; and once there, they'll never leave go while there's any breath in his body."

Zett walked out of the shop, and again Mr. Farrow stood looking at the door until the bell ceased to jangle. Then he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and replaced his hat on the head of the Prime Minister.

"Her watch-dog, by Jove!" he exclaimed, and the idea so astonished him that he went into the back parlor and had another dose of gin.

Zett tucked the doll under his arm and made his way to Kensington.

CHAPTER XXVI

A POUND A WEEK

THE flat in Kensington seemed small now, for Mrs. Tennant and her children had come to live there. It was only a temporary arrangement, Mrs. Tennant declared, but she had been there quite a long time, and there was no talk of any change being made.

Gilbert had left his wife little—so little, indeed, that without Olive's help she would have been in dire straits. At Olive's advice she sold the greater part of the furniture, and gave up the house in Harmony Road.

"You must wait patiently a little while," Olive said. "The royalties on Gilbert's play will bring you a good deal of money, and until you know how you stand, you must economize."

"Which in other words means living upon you," said Mrs. Tennant.

"Only for a little while. Besides, are we not as sisters?"

"I know Providence was very good to me when it gave me such a friend as you are."

"My dear Mary, no arrangement could possibly be better. I am not fond of living all alone, and in my position it is hardly wise, perhaps. I have enemies, as you know. Come and protect me."

The play was a great success. It settled down for a long run. It was produced in America, and already one provincial company was playing it. Money flowed into Mrs. Tennant's treasury, and it was received with much thankfulness and many tears. Gilbert after all had not left his wife penniless, and many a regret did the widow feel when she remembered how

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little she had encouraged her husband in those literary labors of his which were now her salvation.

"If I had only known," she said to Olive.

"Sometimes we do not understand," was the gentle answer. "You were not to blame, Mary. You were right to be anxious. Gilbert was improvident. He was always looking to the future and never thinking of the present. How could you know that the future would bring him success?"

"And Gilbert never to know it."

"Not know it!" exclaimed Olive. "But he does. I feel convinced of that. Death is not the end of life, Mary—of real life—it is the beginning, the passing from school days to real manhood. There was a time, my dear, when I did not think of these things much, but as one gets older and gets dragged into the world's battle, the knowledge that life is but a very small consideration forces itself upon one. I am theatrical, so forgive the simile; it is the prologue to the real play, the explanatory part of it, the something that goes before. I cannot express myself, but do you not understand what I mean?"

"I think I do."

Olive put her arms round Mrs. Tennant's shoulders.

"Death, after all, you know, dear, is not the worst of evils. There are far worse deaths than the bodily one—the death of love, the death of faith. It is very hard to be bodily alive, yet dead to these two."

"Are you, Olive?"

"Yes. I have thought of love and faith in the long waking hours of the night. I believe they are both dead for me." She sighed and turned the conversation into another channel.

Although she was at times depressed, since Mrs. Tennant and her children had come to live with her, Olive had experienced the most peaceful period of her existence. She had others to think of before herself, and this is real happiness. To succeed in being thoroughly miserable one need only be self-centered, self-

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absorbed. It may seem pleasant at first, but the pleasure lasts for a very little while. There are few persons we get so easily tired of as ourselves.

So Olive experienced peace, if not happiness. She had not been able to blot out Victor Densham's image entirely from her mind, but it was a thing of the past—a remembrance only. She did not regret that he had come into her life. She recognized that his coming into it had changed her—had made her, in spite of everything, a better woman. He had turned her spring of love into summer—a short-lived, a disappointing summer, it is true—but still one in which the flowers of her being opened to the sun; and when a woman's heart has once so blossomed she is changed. The autumn of doubt may scatter the petals, the biting winter of disillusion may strike into the very root and kill it—still the woman will not forget the summer, brief though it may have been.

Another source of peace had come to her. She had no longer any anxiety about the future. An eccentric old lady who had seen her act had left her money. It was not a fortune, but it was sufficient to bring in between three and four hundred a year. If the public got tired of her, she had something to fall back upon—something behind which to shelter the Tennants and herself. It was of them she thought first always.

Into the peaceful ménage of the flat in Kensington there suddenly came a disturbing element. Olive was working one afternoon, and at intervals giving advice and help to Mavis, who was laboriously making garments for the doll Zett had given her, when the servant came in and told Olive a man wanted to see her.

“Did he give no name?”

“No, miss. He is a poor man—at least he is poorly dressed.”

“I will see him. You can bring him here. Mavis darling, you run away for a little while.”

Mavis was so long in gathering up her belongings that the man had entered the room before she left it.

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He stood aside to let her pass, and she looked at him with a considerable amount of contempt in her little face. Everything about her was so dainty, and this individual was so exceedingly dirty and greasy. Hugging her doll and its bundle of half-made clothes, she went out and closed the door.

The man took a step into the room and then stood still. His bravado was checked at the sight of the woman who rose slowly from her chair and faced him.

"Well, Clara?"

"That is not my name."

"Pardon—Miss Vaughan."

"What do you want?"

"You don't give your father a very cordial welcome."

"No; I do not feel it," she answered. "You may sit down."

Jacob Farrow looked round the room, his eyes shifting uneasily from one piece of furniture to another.

"In the presence of such a great lady, I think I'd prefer to stand."

"As you like. What is your business with me?"

It was a long time since Olive's face had worn so hard an expression as it did just now. The thin lips closed firmly as she waited for her father's answer, and there was a warning glow in her eyes as she looked at him. Her manner was not without its effect upon Jacob Farrow. He had come here to bully and frighten her, but he understood that to attempt this would be useless. The woman before him was entirely a different person to the daughter he had known.

"I came to see you, hoping you would be glad to see me again. No one would be likely to take me for your father, but the fact remains that I am."

"You forfeited all your rights as a father years ago. It would be as well not to force the fact of our relationship upon me. I am more likely to listen quietly to you if you let me forget as much as possible

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that you are my father. Therefore again I ask, what is your business with me?"

"I'm getting an old man," said Farrow, "and I can't forget that I have a daughter. Perhaps I ain't been all I ought to 'a' been to you, same as perhaps you ain't been to me quite all you ought to 'a' been. There's always faults on both sides, and for my part I want to let bygones be bygones. It's bad to bear malice."

"We will not argue about the past. Clara Farrow, your daughter, died years ago. Please understand that at once. You have no daughter now. I have no father."

"I didn't expect you'd be so hard," said the old man. "You've prospered. Maybe you found some of the advice I gave you useful."

"If you have no business with me, I shall be glad to be alone."

Olive got up and went toward the bell.

"One moment," said Farrow. "I have business, but I wanted to see you for yourself. You needn't believe it, but it's true. The first moment I knew where to find you I came."

"And who told you where to find me?"

"Mr. Overton. A very nice gentleman, and spoke most feelingly of you."

"That is not true. I know Mr. Overton. We will not discuss him, or his motives."

"Well, you know best, of course. I thought maybe he was still—still helping you."

"Whatever help Mr. Overton once gave me he has been paid for—paid for in hard cash. If he should attempt to make you believe otherwise, he may have to pay for the slander. Do you quite understand?"

"He's a bad 'un, is he? Well, I shouldn't 'a' thought it. I thought he was trying to patch up things between you and me, making things up like, because there's no denying he was the cause of your running away from home."

"Excuse me, you were the cause."

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"Bygones," whined old Farrow. "Can't we let bygones alone. I'm getting old. Maybe I'll die before long, and I've had a cruel hard time. When I look around this 'ere room with all the luxury and what not, I could cry. If you ain't forgotten the old shop altogether, you'll know what a difference there is between it and this. And the shop ain't what it used to be. I've got no one to look after me, and business is cruel bad. It'll come to the workhouse. You wouldn't like to see me come to that?"

"No."

"Ah, there's some pity left in you. You've got on, as I always said you would. You're rich, and I'm pretty nigh starving. I don't take up much room, and my wants are small. Let's patch up things. I'll get rid of the shop and come and live along with you."

"No, Mr. Farrow, that is quite out of the question. Your tale of poverty may be true or not—I do not intend to inquire into it. I do not wish you to go to the workhouse, but I have no intention of making a home for you. On certain conditions I will help you, but the conditions must be kept to the letter, or the help ceases."

"It's sympathy I want as well as help."

"I have no sympathy to give."

"That's a cruel hard thing to hear from your lips."

"Have you any right to my sympathy?" asked Olive, looking at him sharply.

"I'm your father. You can't alter that."

"I have done my best to forget it. To remind me of it only hardens me. I will instruct my solicitor to pay you a pound a week on these conditions—you are not to come to my house, or write to me, or attempt to hold any communication with me whatever. In my own way I am happy now, and I do not intend to jeopardize my peace and happiness by having anything to do with a man who, although he was my father, would have ruined me body and soul had he been able to do so. In self-defense I broke the tie between us years ago. We can never have anything

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more to do with each other. Do you quite understand me?"

"It's cruel hard," said Farrow.

"I know you too well to be concerned about your feelings. I believe I know your real intention in coming to me. Edward Overton thought it an excellent revenge to give you information concerning me, and you conceived you had an excellent opportunity to bully me and spoil my life as much as possible. I take this means of holding the whip hand over you; and, make no mistake, I will have no mercy if you annoy me. My life is now and always has been open to the day—there is nothing in it of which I am ashamed; and if by word or deed you, or anyone, attempts to rob me of my good name, I will punish them. From next Saturday you shall receive a pound a week, so long as you keep away from me. That is all I have to say to you."

She rang the bell.

"I'd refuse the money if I wasn't so poor."

"You will forfeit it if the conditions are not kept to the letter."

The servant entered.

"The door, Rachel," said Olive.

For one moment Farrow seemed inclined to break out into furious wrath, but the woman looked at him, and he remembered the pound a week.

"Good day, Miss Vaughan."

"Good day."

The door of the flat closed upon him, and he shuffled down the stairs into the street.

"Damn her," he growled; "she's beaten me. A pound a week! What's the good of that? I want to be able to drag money out of her just when I like, to turn up when she least wants me to give her away to her swell friends. I wonder who pays for that flat? A pound a week! I'll have more than that, my fine lady, before I've done with you."

The disreputable scoundrel turned into the first public house he came to and called for gin.

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"It won't satisfy Overton. He'll want that ten quid. I might drive a bargain with him. He might pay me two pounds a week. That crooked devil Zett goes there; that child had the doll he bought from me. Who's the child, I wonder? There's things to find out about Miss Vaughan, and I'll do it." He kicked at a cur in the bar savagely. One could imagine him brute enough to kick a woman with like savagery.

Olive called the servant when she had let Jacob Farrow out.

"Rachel, should that man call to see me again, I am out. I am always out to him."

"Yes, miss."

"Who was your visitor, Olive?" Mrs. Tennant asked. "I met him going out. He looked to me as if he had been drinking."

"It's more than likely," Olive answered; and when the servant had gone she went on—"That, Mary, was my father."

"How did he find you?"

"Mr. Overton told him. An excellent device to annoy me, isn't it; but I fancy I have effectually put a stop to their plan," and she told Mrs. Tennant what she was going to do.

"I hardly think it a wise proceeding."

"It gives me a hand over him."

"But not over Overton."

"I shall find means to silence him, if necessary."

"You're very brave, Olive."

"Nowadays I have a good deal to lose, my dear Mary. I have made a position, and I intend to defend it. I really believe it is in me to be absolutely unmerciful."

"Is it, dear? I should hardly have thought it."

CHAPTER XXVII

SOMETHING HAPPENS

WHEN Zett was told of Mr. Farrow's visit, he said very little. He was not surprised at it. He had expected that he would come when he heard that Overton had given him the address, but he had not warned Olive. She would know how to treat her father if he came, he argued, and it was not worth while troubling her about it beforehand. Zett was silent for another reason. He had made up his mind to defend Olive effectually, should occasion arise, and he did not believe Farrow was half as dangerous as Edward Overton. If he talked to Olive too much, he felt he might betray his anxiety, and then she would possibly order him not to do anything without first asking her. To be hampered in this way did not suit Zett. If action were necessary he intended to take it, no matter what the consequences might be. He had a task to perform, and he set about its accomplishment in his own way. Edward Overton would have been surprised had he known under what strict surveillance he was in these days. Zett studied him, watched his goings and comings. His most innocent actions were known to the cripple and carefully thought over, lest they should contain danger in them. Zett knew Overton's friends, and contrived to find out something about them too; and starting from the conviction that Overton was bad, he came to the conclusion that he was much worse probably than he really was. To lower the pride of Olive Vaughan was only one interest in Overton's life—a side issue almost. His thirst for revenge was not insatiable—only, having in Jacob Farrow a means to his hand, he was tempted to make

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use of him. Twice he visited the shop in the Waterloo Road, and Zett knew it.

"Farrow won't do much so long as he gets his pound a week," Zett said to himself. "It's the other one who'll do the mischief, and I'm going to stop him."

How, he did not know, and he never mentioned to Olive what was in his mind. Whatever was to be done must be done without her knowledge. She must not be dragged into it in any way.

Edward Overton was not satisfied with what Farrow had done.

"I shall not tear your bill up yet, my friend," he told Farrow.

"What else can I do?"

"Your experience should have been a better school-master. You go to pay off an old score, to get even with your daughter, and you quietly accept a pound a week to hold your tongue."

"The money's useful."

"You might have had a great deal more than that. Had you chosen your times for turning up well, she would have paid you anything you asked to go away. You're not a father she would be proud of, you know."

"Nor you ain't a friend she's proud of neither. We're in the same boat."

"I think not; but it is of no consequence. Of course, if you're contented with what you have done there is nothing more to be said."

"If I did anything more, she'd stop the money; and if that didn't do for me, she'd lock me up."

"Nonsense. Do you suppose she is going to make a vulgar police court case of you? You do not understand your daughter. Besides, after all, you are her father."

"That doesn't go for much with her now."

It was a miserable end to which Overton was lending himself. He was disgusted with himself sometimes, but he could not resist the temptation to be even with Olive Vaughan. She had found him out, had unmasked him and shown him in his true charac-

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ter. A scoundrel cannot forgive the woman who does this. So Overton made use of Farrow, and stepped deeper into the mire of discreditable meanness. Farrow, by nature a bully and a scamp, believed good of nobody. He literally did not trust anyone, and he did not for a moment imagine that his daughter was the blameless woman she gave herself out to be. He only thought that she had been clever enough to leave him out. She had become rich, and he was not allowed to reap the benefit of her prosperity. She had beaten him at his own game, and he hated her for it. This being his only point of view, he listened eagerly to Overton's suggestions.

"Give me something definite to go on," he said; "she's kept everything so very dark."

"She'll be the more ashamed of you, and pay you the better to keep out of the way."

"Whose kid is that she has with her?"

Overton shrugged his shoulders.

"Why don't you ask her? You miss your opportunities, Farrow. Why not ask her some evening when she is leaving the St. George's Theater?"

"A good notion; but how about my pound a week?"

"You're not a pauper."

"No; but I love money."

"Quite so; and you owe me ten pounds."

"I'd like to know why you hate her so much," said Farrow.

"I do not hate her. I love her."

Farrow whistled.

"Love her, eh? And she won't have anything to do with you. That's the difficulty, is it? Good Lord, she's shown some wisdom anyway."

"On the contrary, she has had a good deal to do with me."

"Were you her——?"

"Better not ask questions; I might lie to you," answered Overton.

Farrow drew his own conclusions, and the pound

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a week seemed a very paltry sum indeed. There was a higher stake to play for, and day by day he turned the matter over in his mind, ever more determined to risk everything to obtain his ends. If he lost, he was a pound a week poorer; if he won— He rubbed his hands gleefully at the prospect.

His attempt to blackmail his daughter again had far-reaching results. In doing it he unconsciously did good to many, and helped justice too.

The run of Gilbert Tennant's play came to an end, and it so happened that it was on the night of the last performance that Farrow waited for his daughter at the theater. He had made an attempt to see her at the flat during the afternoon, and had been refused admittance. This maddened the old man, and as he consoled himself with gin for the remainder of the afternoon and evening, he was in a most abusive frame of mind when his daughter left the theater door.

Farrow had not the opportunity to say much. He stepped between her and the cab waiting for her, and poured out his abuse; but Mather, who was seeing her to the cab, struck him before he could say very much, and effectually silenced him.

"A drunken brute, hardly worth prosecuting," he said. "Shall I send for the police, Miss Vaughan?"

"No. I know the man; I have a surer way of punishing him," Olive answered. The doorkeeper had picked Farrow up, and had, not very gently, turned him out of the street.

"He is chiefly the tool of another man, Mr. Mather," Olive went on. "I have suffered a considerable amount of persecution at his hands already."

"I should take means to put a stop to it, Miss Vaughan. A woman cannot afford to have these things said about her and remain silent."

"I have already spoken to my solicitor, but there are considerable difficulties. It is almost impossible to bring the lies home to the villain yet."

"May I ask his name?"

"Edward Overton. You probably know something

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of him. It was through him and Mr. Tennant that I got my first chance on the stage, so you can understand my position is not an easy one."

"I can indeed. Edward Overton is a dangerous man, a sham philanthropist; of all individuals the most contemptible. If there is anything I can do, please command me. Will you be away from London long?"

"I don't know. My plans for the future are somewhat chaotic at present."

Olive went home and told Mrs. Tennant what had occurred.

"What are you going to do?"

"I shall go and see the solicitor in the morning. I shall stop the pound a week at once, and I shall let him take what steps he likes with regard to Overton. I very much doubt if he can really do anything."

"There must be some way of stopping such lies."

"He doesn't actually tell the lies; he only suggests them, with a shrug of the shoulders."

"I wish you had some real protector, Olive."

"My dear Mary, I have you. I could not have a better one. Now, I want you to do exactly as I ask you. You will, won't you?"

"I will not promise in the dark."

"It is nothing very dreadful. I want to go away as soon as possible for a holiday—a good long holiday. You and the children must come, and we will shut up the flat for a time."

"Where are you going to?"

"Some small French watering place, and if we don't like it we can go somewhere else. We can do as we like; only I want to get away at once."

"But the expense?" urged Mrs. Tennant.

"Dear, practical Mary, we are not going to be extravagant. We can eat our three meals a day just as cheaply the other side of the Channel as this. How long will it take you to get ready?"

"It will be very little change for you, Olive."

"Do you suppose I am going by myself? By the

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time I got there I should want to start back again. Therefore, Mary, first thing to-morrow morning you must begin your preparations. I can be ready in a few hours."

Zett was told the next day of what had happened at the theater and of the proposed holiday. His fists closed tightly as he heard of the first; he seemed to think the holiday a very good plan.

"You'll be out of their way," he said. "Perhaps somethink will happen before you come back."

"Something happen! What do you mean?" Olive asked.

"Nothink; but somethink happens most days, don't it?" answered Zett. "Only last week there was a potman at the King's Arms came to the door to look down the street one mornin', and he never went in again; not of his own accord. They carried him in, 'cos somethink had happened. He'd fell down dead sudden."

"How dreadful!"

"Maybe. I never knew anythink agin him, but that ain't saying there was nothink. Somebody may have been jolly glad to get rid of him. Well, if this cove Overton was to manage to get somethink in his throat what would choke him, or get run over by a good heavy waggin, somethink would have happened, and I give you my word I shouldn't cry, not much."

"There may be somebody in the world who would shed tears for him. Few men are altogether without friends."

"He's got friends; but they're mostly like himself, wrong 'uns."

"Perhaps he is not as bad as we think him."

"If he's only half as bad as what I think him, he'll do. He'd be a sight safer under a good heavy waggin. Have you seen Mr. Victor Densham again?"

"No."

"Pity he warn't a bit more impressed. He'd 'a' been able to give us some advice. I thought he'd be certain to like you. Didn't you like him?"

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"Yes."

"But not very much?"

"Yes; a great deal."

"Do you know, I once had a sort o' dream," said Zett, after a pause. "I warn't asleep, you know. I was just walking in the sun along by Waterloo Station, and there warn't nothing goin' on just then, and I thought suddenly of you and Mr. Victor Densham. They ought to get married, thinks I. They're just the two for each other. Then I remember the evening when I said it wouldn't be a bad idea if you married me. Do you remember it? Well, I've seen things a bit better since them days. I was out of it for all sorts o' reasons; but, as it was so, it seemed to me Mr. Victor Densham was the man to take my place. It's a great pity he warn't more impressed."

Olive turned away, for there were tears in her eyes.

"Somethink'll happen maybe; somethink generally does happen," said Zett reflectively.

"Nothing can ever happen to make me forget a real friend, Zett."

Olive turned impulsively toward him, and put her hands upon his shoulders.

"If Mr. Victor Densham had been more impressed, you'd soon 'a' forgotten all about me."

"Never, Zett. I have been tempted sometimes to think ill of all the world, and then I've remembered you, and known that there are stanch hearts in it—men a woman can trust and confidently lean upon. You will never know, Zett, what your friendship has meant to me, and I cannot repay you. You will never let me do anything for you."

"There's nothink I want. Money I couldn't take from a girl. If I was hungry I might come and ask you for a meal, but I ain't hungry. Don't you worry about me. What's this you've got in your dress?"

She still stood with her hands on his shoulders, her tall figure in marked contrast to the crippled dwarf. She put her hand to her throat and undid the brooch.

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"Clara—Olive, I mean, is that the one what I give you?"

"Yes. I had a new pin put in a little while ago. I brought the brooch with me when I ran away from home."

"I gave sixpence for it," said Zett.

"And I wouldn't sell it for pounds."

He looked at the common little wooden trinket for a moment, and handed it back to her.

"I wonder you kept it, but it kind o' makes me happier all the same. I hope I'll live to see you real happy with perhaps some children o' your own, and a real good man alongside of you, and for you, or anyone you loves, I'd just give up my life. It's all I have to give, but it's yours." He took her hand suddenly, and held it so firmly that he almost hurt her. For a moment he looked up into her face, then kissed her hand passionately. "I am yours, that is my oath. God bless you."

The blessing came halting from his lips. He heard God's name more often mentioned in a curse than a blessing. He left Olive without another word, and hurried down the stairs into the street.

"It's a good thing she's goin' away," he said to himself. "She won't know nothink about anythink."

And Zett went firmly to wait and watch, and fulfill the purpose which he had in hand.

The flat had been closed three days when Overton heard of it. The Honorable imparted the information to him.

"Saw it in the *Lookout* this morning. Half expected to see you had left town too."

"I haven't, you see," Overton answered irritably.

"You need not be so angry about it. It isn't my fault that the beautiful Miss Vaughan doesn't think much of Mr. Overton."

"I do not think my affairs need discussing."

"By Jove, perhaps not. I'm not a saint, Overton, but——"

"I never accused you of being one."

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"I was going to say that I don't think I should play as low down a game as you have, although I am not a saint."

"What are you referring to?"

"That story of yours about going abroad with Olive Vaughan. It was all lies. Bella told me so."

"I am not aware that I ever told you such a story."

"What!" exclaimed the Honorable. "You deny telling Emerson and me such a story?"

"Most emphatically."

The Honorable took off his hat to let the cooling breeze of Pall Mall blow upon his head, and he gave a low whistle.

"If you and Emerson jumped to a conclusion, that is your affair, not mine. If I remember rightly, I warned you not to do so."

"Are you going on to the club?" the Honorable asked.

"Yes; are you?"

"I was; but I have changed my mind. I won't just now. I might be tempted to say insulting things to you," and he turned on his heel and left him.

Overton was savage. He had seen Jacob Farrow that morning, and had heard what had happened on the last night of the play. Later he had met Mather, and the actor had talked to him as probably he had never been talked to before; had told him to his face that he was a contemptible scoundrel and richly deserved a horsewhipping.

"I am only sorry, Mr. Overton, you haven't pluck enough to insult me and give me an excuse for thrashing you. You are of the kind who only dare to insult women," he had said.

Now this Honorable puppy had dared to refuse to walk to the club with him.

"I should like to be even with them all," he said; "and I will too. I can wait. Olive gone! Where to, and for how long, I wonder?"

As he entered the club smoking room, Densham came out. The two men could not help ~~standing~~ ^{staring} face

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to face for a moment. Overton thought Densham had stopped on purpose.

"How are you?" he said.

Densham looked at him from head to foot, and then passed on without a word. That other men saw the cut given only enraged Overton more. He was conscious that for some time he had been in bad odor among his companions. The influences he had set to work against others were recoiling upon himself. He looked like a beaten hound, ready to snarl at anyone who approached him, as he retired to an unoccupied corner of the smoking room. He sat there all the evening, smoking one cigar after another. The club was almost empty when he rose to go.

Outside it was dark, and a drizzling rain was falling. St. James's Street was empty. Pedestrians had effectually been driven home. Overton was obliged to walk to Piccadilly for a cab. Half way up the street a man started from a doorway and confronted him. Overton drew back.

"What do you want?"

There was no answer, but the man sprang at him. Overton had only time to call once loudly for help when his throat was clutched in a grip like a vice. By the light of a lamp he recognized his assailant, and struggled desperately to free himself. He was no weakling, but in the hands of this man his strength seemed like water.

"You shall tell no more lies," hissed his assailant.

The fingers at his throat were like steel, and gripped harder and harder. His breath came in gasps and shorter. His muscles relaxed and his legs bent under him.

There were hurrying feet on the pavement—voices in the night. They had come too soon—a little too soon. Only a few moments longer and a short gasp would have been the last.

The man clutching his victim's throat recognized that help was near. He gathered all his strength together and threw his victim heavily upon the curb.

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Then he waited quietly while the little crowd gathered. He made no attempt to get away.

"You can look to him first. I ain't goin' to move," he said.

The crowd grew larger. The news of a murderous assault in St. James's Street traveled quickly. The victim lay white and still upon the pavement. His assailant stood by the railings of a club apparently indifferent.

"He isn't dead," said a man in the crowd.

The prisoner's face remained impassive. There was no sign to show whether the information pleased him or not.

A stretcher was brought. The limp, unconscious man was lifted on to it, and the crowd broke up. But one little knot of people followed the stretcher to St. George's Hospital, and another followed the prisoner to Vine Street Police Station.

The rain fell faster. As a gust of wind caught it, it lashed across St. James's Street with a sharp swish, and monotonously, and at regular intervals, great drops fell from the roofs to the pavement with a splash, which sounded strangely loud in the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DENSHAM'S GOOD RESOLUTIONS

AFTER going to the St. George's Theater to see Olive Vaughan on the first night of Tennant's play, Victor Densham went abroad. He had no purpose in going but to try and forget the woman he loved. He roamed from one place to another, hardly making an acquaintance, and studiously keeping away from places where he was likely to meet any one he knew. He succeeded in being thoroughly miserable, but he could not forget. Tennant's play had rendered him more hopeless, if that were possible. The story had much in it that seemed to fit the circumstances of his case. In the play the wife forgave her husband, but left him. Olive had forgiven him, but had said that his repentance came too late. In the play the ending had seemed the natural one. How could he hope that in real life there could be anything added? How could there be a sequel with a happy ending?

He came back to London, and it was on the following evening that he encountered Overton at the entrance to the smoking room. Rather unfairly he attributed the ruin of his hopes in a great measure to him. He could have thrashed Overton when he had spoken to him, but on the whole was glad he had kept his temper. He left the club at once to keep out of the way of temptation.

"It would have been just the same if that blackguard had not forestalled me," he said to himself; and then he laughed bitterly. "I have a pretty right to call anybody a blackguard. Judged dispassionately, I suppose I am as great a scoundrel as he is. I deserve a thrashing myself."

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He had intended to go and see the play again for the sake of seeing Olive, but the theater was closed, and he did not attempt to make any inquiries about her. She had passed out of his life altogether. He might see her sometimes when she appeared in a new piece, but that was all.

The rooms in Jermyn Street were miserable. He had no friend to talk to, to confide in. He was more alone than he had ever been in his life.

He went to Felstead, not that he expected to be any happier there, but he was restless. He felt obliged to move about.

He had not been to the Hall since he had left it immediately after his wife's funeral. It was almost a shock to find that nothing had changed either there or in the village. True, Mrs. Elliott had now become Mrs. Parker, but that made no difference. She welcomed him as she had always done, and Parker waited upon him as if nothing had happened. Everything in Densham's life had changed so, it seemed unnatural that all around him should be as usual.

"So you are married, Parker?" he said, as he rose from his lonely dinner.

"Yes, sir."

"And feel full of new responsibilities."

"Not exactly, sir. Everything goes on pretty much the same as usual. I insured my life for a little more, sir; that is about all, I think."

"Eminently practical, Parker."

"Marrying Mrs. Elliott, sir, is not like marrying a young girl. I have always been rather afraid of young females."

Densham smiled.

"They require a great deal of a man, sir. They enter the state of matrimony with the idea that the man has nothing to do but look after their happiness. A man becomes little better than a slave in that way, sir."

"Is that so, Parker?"

"It has always struck me like that, sir; and if the

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young female happens to be pretty, it's worse still. She is always ready to tell her husband how many men, better than he is, she might have married. Now with Mrs. Elliott that time is past, sir."

"You have evidently gone into the question very thoroughly," said Densham.

"Yes, sir, I have. Marriage is a step which requires well considering before taking. The matches, sir?"

Parker put the box before his master, and receiving no comment on the assertion respecting marriage, left the room. Densham remembered it, however, and smiled rather grimly next morning when he heard Mrs. Parker talking in a more peremptory tone to her husband than she had ever presumed to do when she was Mrs. Elliott.

"A wife does not forget her privileges, it seems, even when she is no longer young and has been married before," he said to himself.

On Sunday he went to church, and as he settled himself in the corner of his pew, he glanced involuntarily at the place where Olive had sat that morning so long ago; but Robin Mackenzie and his wife were alone there now. Still Densham could almost have lined out the space in the air which she had filled. He remembered distinctly the white gown, the very curves of it, and the graceful set of the hat, and every line and tint of color in her face. Almost she seemed to stand there to-day, so vividly he saw her in his mind's eye. He bent his head lower in the prayers. To-day they had a new meaning for him—were more personal, he thought, than they had ever been before. He had promised for her sake to try and be a better man. His life should not be all failure. He would do something with it. Although great happiness could never be his, peace could be found in making others happy. It would be something when he closed his eyes for the last time if there should be some one who mourned him as a true friend, one whose death was a real loss to them. The gate of Heaven opens

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easily to those who come to it borne on the blessings of sorrowing men and women.

It was in a more peaceful mood that Densham vaulted the stile and went toward the Hall across the fields. He was full of good resolutions, and the swing of his arms indicated that he had no intention of being satisfied with merely making resolutions. Action must follow, and at once. Looking back over his life he could see only barren land; before him there must be soil to turn and work until it laughed with a harvest. How should he commence? He would offer himself for some labor where his energy and his money would bear fruit. To whom could he turn, of whom ask advice?

He was half way across the first field, when he heard his name called:

"Mr. Densham!"

He turned, and hurrying after him was Robin Mackenzie.

"Squire!" Robin was a little out of breath. He raised his hat and shifted his stick from one hand to the other. He had made up his mind what to say, but somehow he forgot it all now.

"Well, Mackenzie, is there anything I can do for you?"

"There is."

"What is it?"

"Will you shake hands with me?"

"With all my heart."

It was a strong grip, and for some moments neither of them spoke.

"Squire, I thought I did what was right that day."

"You did, Mackenzie."

"No, I didn't," Robin answered. "I misjudged ye. I just spoke out my mind, and I forgot that to some men there come temptations that I know nothing of. I forgot that a strong man may fall, yet rise again stronger."

"The grip of your hand, Mackenzie, puts new strength into me. I have been making good resolu-

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tions. You give me better power to carry them out."

"I'm right glad. You're a young man still, Squire, and there's a deal of life before you and happiness too, I hope."

"Of a kind, perhaps," Densham answered. "I told you my story, Mackenzie. I have made my confession to Miss Vaughan."

"I know that."

"You have seen her?"

"Yes; and I gave her your letter. Indeed, she came to ask for it."

"When?"

"After you had told her everything."

Densham thoughtfully dug a little hole in the foot-path with the heel of his boot.

"I lost the happiness of my life, Mackenzie, by forgetting to be honorable. I am afraid I injured her too—that is my worst regret."

"Is it too late, Squire?"

"I asked her that question, and she said it was, and I know her answer was final."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure, yes—why, Mackenzie, what do you mean?" Densham caught his arm and looked eagerly into his face.

"Fields are bare and furrowed after the plow has gone over them, but for all that, because of it, there comes the time of harvest."

"I have only to do with the aftermath," said Densham.

"I saw and talked to Miss Vaughan, Squire."

"Tell me, Mackenzie—tell me, if there is anything to tell."

"I have nothing to tell; but—Mr. Densham, will you answer me one question truly, as truly as—well, it's Sabbath morning, the worst day in all the week for untruths."

"I will answer truly," Densham answered. "I was never a liar, Mackenzie."

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"Do you love the lass?"

"Yes; I love her as few women are loved. My conduct may seem to give my words the lie; but for her sake I intend to let my life prove my words. For her sake, I say; but there is a higher motive, which my love for her has taught me. The love of a man for a woman, Mackenzie, has almost always something of passion in it—mine had; now there is more than love in it—something of worship."

"She came for your letter, Squire, after you had confessed to her—after she knew everything that was in it—do you understand?"

"Well?"

"When Jane—you know my wife always has had prejudices—when Jane was a bit down on you, Miss Vaughan defended you."

"It is her nature to be generous. I believe she did pity me a little."

"She told me that I had been hard on you—told me that—well, Squire, she proved to me what I have been learning ever since that day in my yard, that you were a man of real grit. Were I you I would search the world for Miss Vaughan, and ask her once more whether it is too late."

"Mackenzie!"

"I may be sending you on a fool's errand," said Robin; "but in your place I would go on it myself."

"You think——"

"I'd sooner say no more, and Jane's walking home slowly, expecting me to catch her up."

"The grip of your hand put heart into me, Mackenzie; your words have given me hope. Thank you."

"I thought I was right in saying what I did, Squire," said Robin, as he grasped Densham's offered hand again; "I meant it when I said I had it in my mind to do my level best to thrash you. I'm not going to apologize for it; but I said it to the man I thought you were, and I've now been giving a bit of advice to the man I know you are."

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"I shall take the advice, Mackenzie."

"And, Squire, there's—there's still some of the last brew left, and it's in fine condition. I'll be right glad if ye'll come in at my gates and try it."

"I should like to come, but—but Mrs. Mackenzie?"

"When the lass had gone, taking your letter with her, Jane seemed to alter her opinion—a thing I've never known her to do before. What she said exactly was this, and from her it meant a great deal: 'Robin,' she said, 'I don't believe the Squire is as bad as I thought he was.'"

"Then I'll come, Mackenzie."

Densham turned homeward. There was a new light in his eyes, a new youth in his quick step. He had believed that he had gathered in his harvest and found it only tares, and he had bowed his head to the justice of his reaping. Was it possible that there was yet good grain to be garnered? He looked timidly over the hedgerows of hope which Mackenzie had shown him, and fancied he saw a laughing valley of golden corn.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PUNISHMENT OF A CRIME

PARKER brought in the postbag, and, taking the key from its place on the mantelpiece, handed it to his master.

"I am going to town, Parker, by the noon train. Pack my portmanteau, will you?"

"Yes, sir. Shall you be away long?"

"I don't know."

"Am I to go with you, sir?"

"No, Parker."

Densham opened his letters. They were of small interest except the last one. This he had read twice when Parker entered the room again.

"I think you must go to town with me after all," said Densham. "I have a letter here which alters my plans."

"Yes, sir; the noon train—very well, sir."

Parker would have expressed no surprise had his master told him to be ready to leave for Yokohama in half an hour. It is quite certain that he would have been ready at the time appointed.

Densham read the letter again. It was from an official at Holloway Jail, who stated that he wrote at the request of a prisoner on remand there, named Zett. "You may have seen in the newspapers that a murderous assault was made upon a gentleman in St. James's Street a few nights ago," the letter went on. "The prisoner, who is a cripple, requests me to write and remind you that you once said he might apply to you if he were in trouble. He would like to see you, if you can possibly come to him. As the victim of the assault—Edward Overton by name—lies in St. George's Hospital in a very precarious condition, it is quite possible that the prisoner may be committed

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for trial on the capital charge. Zett is the only name he gives, and he refuses all further information concerning himself."

"I must do what I can to help him," Densham said. "What new villainy can Overton have conceived to make Zett take the law into his own hands in this way? Something to do with Olive, it is certain. Overton in a precarious condition. It will go hard with Zett. It is a strange thing that, as I am on the point of setting out to find Olive, this should delay me. When I had determined to find her before I was prevented. Is it a good omen, I wonder, or a bad one?" And then, as he turned to finish his breakfast, Densham accused himself of selfishness. "I must look after Zett first. I hope Overton will live."

From Jermyn Street Densham took a cab to Holloway, and was immediately taken to the prisoner.

Zett rose to greet him.

"I wasn't sure you'd come; but somehow I thought you would."

"I am glad you sent for me. Now, Zett, tell me all about it."

"There ain't much to tell, guv'nor. If they'd been a minute later I should have killed him."

"What made you do it?"

"He's done everythink what he could to ruin her—lied, and lied, and lied. I've been watchin' him for weeks. He's been down to the shop off the Waterloo Road and got her father to go for her. She gave him a pound a week if he wouldn't go near her any more. The blackguard was satisfied until Overton got hold of him again. Then he goes one night to the theayter, and as she's leavin', calls her all sorts o' names, and says—well, you knows the kind o' things he would say. There was a fellow with her out o' the theayter, an actor chap, and he knocks Farrow down. She told me all about it."

"What did her father say, Zett?"

"For one thing, asked her whose child it was what was living with her."

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"A child!"

"Yes. Since Mr. Tennant died, Mrs. Tennant and her two children have been livin' in the same flat with her in Kensington. It was Overton what put Farrow up to it, and I—well, I knew it had got to stop—see?"

"You waited for Overton?"

"Four hours; and it was rainin' all the time. I saw him go into that place in St. James's Street, and I watched until he came out. I meant to stop his lyin' any more."

"Do you know that he may die, Zett?"

"It's an accident he ain't dead now. It ain't my fault. I did my best, only they came an' stopped me a bit too soon. I'd 'a' killed him if they'd left me alone. If they'd known what a blackguard he was, I expect they wouldn't 'a' hurried so much."

"Does Olive—does Miss Vaughan know?" asked Densham.

"No; and she ain't goin' to if I can help it. She's gone away. The flat's locked up. She's gone to France—a place called St.—St. Somethink—St. Maux, or some name like that. She's out of the way, and won't know nothink about anythink."

"We must do what we can to get you out of the trouble," said Densham thoughtfully.

"I ain't goin' to say as I'm sorry, 'cos I ain't. I'm only sorry that I didn't finish him."

"My poor fellow, do you know what it means for you?"

"I say, gov'nor, have you ever thought what it's meant for her?"

"Yes, Zett, I have thought of that."

"Well, I've had a try to save her, that's all," Zett answered. "She's been to me what no one else in the world's been. When she was a youngster she came an' stood by me agin' the boys what jeered at me 'cos I was a cripple; an' I told her then it 'ud be my turn to stand by her some day, and my turn's come. I'd got life what I could give for her, and it's hers; only, gov'nor, I don't want her to be brought into it."

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"How can we help it, Zett?"

The cripple laughed.

"That's easy. I ain't said nothink. When they asked me what I done it for, I didn't say nothink about her. She need know nothink about it."

"She is certain to know, Zett, sooner or later," Densham answered.

"It won't matter when it's all over. What'll I get, Mr. Densham?"

"I don't know, Zett."

"Maybe a lifer," said the cripple, as though he were speculating about some one else.

"I hope not."

"Of course I hopes not, too," Zett went on; "but whatever it is, I'm ready. All I want is to keep her out of it. If the papers goes and makes a lot of it, there'll be some people as will think it was her fault, that everythink wasn't all straight like."

"I'm going to do all in my power to help you, Zett."

"That's very good o' you, Mr. Densham; but never mind what happens to me, keep her out of it."

Zett was remanded several times. Inquiries failed to prove anything against him in the past. Those who had known him had nothing but good to say of him; and when it was known that the name he had given was the only one he had ever known, that he was a nameless piece of flotsam tossed to and fro on the world's tide, there was much sympathy for him. Why had he attacked Edward Overton, a gentleman who was well known, and could hardly have had anything to do with the nameless cripple? There was a mystery somewhere, and the appetite of the public which reads the evening papers is insatiable for mysteries.

Edward Overton lay in St. George's Hospital, and when he could speak was almost as reticent as his assailant. He could not say why the man had attacked him—practically he knew nothing about him at all. It was remarkable that few inquiries, except official ones, were made about Overton at the hospi-

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tal. Although he had been spoken of as a well-known gentleman, which seemed to imply a large circle of friends and acquaintances, the friends did not seem very anxious about him. Perhaps the man who experienced the greatest satisfaction when the doctors declared that Overton was not likely to die from his injuries was Victor Densham. He was glad for Zett's sake. He was glad for Overton's sake too. Whatever his sins were, he had had severe punishment meted out to him. He would never be the same man again, his spine being permanently injured.

Zett was committed for trial. He had made an unprovoked assault with intent to murder. It was in the nature of an accident that he did not stand committed on the capital charge. That it was likely to go hard with Zett, Densham knew, and he had the very best counsel he could get to defend him. The counsel was a member of the Phoenix Club, a personal friend of Densham's, and well acquainted with Overton, whom he disliked exceedingly.

"I expect Overton has got very little more than his deserts," he said to Densham. "The unfortunate part is that the fact does not materially help our friend the cripple."

"I suppose not."

"Had the attack been made in the cause of a wife, or a mother, or a sister, the law might see some excuse in it; as it is—well, we must do our best."

One trial is much like another, made up chiefly of sordid elements, with occasionally a dash of pathos. To the casual listener it is the same story over and over again, told a little differently. Especial sensational interest may sometimes enter into a case, where the prisoner, or some persons connected with it, are of high position, or are well known, or if the surrounding circumstances have worked it into a mystery, but this is not often.

Whatever interest there had been at first in Zett's case had practically died out. The public had got tired of the mysterious assault in St. James's Street,

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and when Zett was placed in the dock, the chief interest was aroused by the fact that he was a cripple.

Zett looked round upon the many faces about him, until his eyes rested upon Densham. There was a look of recognition and of thanks in the prisoner's face. He had one good friend near him—one good friend who would not blame him, as all these others were there to do. This was his estimate of judge and jury, solicitors, reporters, and the rest. There was no sensational evidence—bare hard facts only; and the defense could not soften them. The assault had been premeditated. The prisoner had waited for his victim; and the fact that he had made the attack in the interests of a friend who was supposed to have been deeply injured by the victim of that attack, carried little weight with the jury. There may have been some slight provocation—there might even be some truth in the assertion that the victim of the outrage was not altogether blameless; but this hardly affected the case.

The prisoner was found guilty.

Zett showed no surprise. He had expected nothing else. When asked whether he had anything to say, he promptly answered:

"No, sir, nothink."

Densham was relieved to hear the short answer. He half expected Zett to say that he was only sorry he hadn't killed Overton.

A few minutes later the cripple was removed from the dock sentenced to three years' penal servitude.

"Three years!" Densham muttered. "Poor fellow—three years."

"Got off pretty easily, eh?" he heard a man say to a companion behind him.

There was a stir in the court. Some gathered up their papers and left; others, carrying their papers, hurried in. Another case was called. The cripple had disappeared and was forgotten. The business of life—that seamy life which passes through a criminal court—went on as though nothing extraordinary had

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happened. Nothing had. A man had lost his liberty for three years—that was all; and those whose business compelled them to remain in that stuffy court looked longingly up at the windows, through the dirty panes of which a feeble ray of sunlight struggled.

Densham went to see Zett.

“I’m glad it’s over,” said Zett. “Thanks for all you’ve done for me, guv’nor.”

“I wish I could have done more.”

“You couldn’t. You’ll be seeing her maybe soon, Mr. Densham. Tell her she ain’t to worry about me. I’ll be all right and happy; and you might tell the young ’un—Mavis they calls her—that I hope she’ll not forget me. Thanks for being such a good ’un to me, guv’nor.”

“If I see her, I will tell her.”

“Maybe you’ll like her better when you see her again. I was disappointed you wasn’t more impressed. She wouldn’t say so, but I think she was too. You might give her one more message from me. Tell her that when I come out, I hopes to see her very friendly with Mr. Densham, ’cos she’s my pal, guv’nor, like what you are; the only two in the world what was ever good to me or cared a straw about me.”

“One thing I promise, Zett.”

“What’s that?”

“When you come out, I’ll find that job you once asked me about. It shall be one that shall last you your lifetime, Zett, and give you a home.”

And with this promise the cripple went gladly to pay the penalty of his crime.

CHAPTER XXX

A PERFECT NIGHT AT ST. MAUX

IN a few years perhaps St. Maux may boast a fashionable promenade, a casino, and many other means of entertainment. Women may show off the latest creations of Paris and London as they stroll up and down listening to the band, and the gay town may be full to overflowing. Fashionable intelligence may chronicle that Lord This and Lady That have left town for St. Maux, or that the President of the Republic is shortly expected there for the benefit of his health. But these things are in the future. At present St. Maux is a small place known only to a very few. A cottage can be had close to the sea at a ridiculously cheap rent, and there is only one small hotel. There is no fashion there, no casino. There is no excitement when the only three trains which run in the day come in. They are often quite empty, having unloaded their passengers at a fashionable resort ten miles farther back along the coast.

It is a place of rest—a quiet retreat to retire to from the bustle of life and the noise of the world—a place to recruit one's strength in, and refresh a weary mind. The air has new health in it, and the broad expanse of ocean calls forth larger thoughts, deeper sympathies, and stimulates a better, truer appreciation of the really good things in this world, and those false things we call good, and spend our feverish lives to obtain. No one is wealthy in St. Maux, no one is famous; and the books in the cottages all put together would make a very poor library. But they are happy in St. Maux; they are healthy. Nature is a great mother to them, has nursed them into strong children, and kissed them so persistently with her smiles and tears that their

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cheeks glow with a ruddy brown. They live long in St. Maux, and see their children's children to the fourth generation. What do they want with fame, or riches or great learning?

A mile along the coast there was a rocky promontory. When the tide was out, it left deep pools in rugged basins, where seaweed floated gracefully, and shells lay like jewels in the cool, clear water. Here Mavis and Frank spent the greater part of their time running eagerly at intervals to show some new-found treasure to their mother or Olive, who sat working or reading close by. It was here that Olive sat and dreamed of all that was, of all that might have been. She was not unhappy—she recognized how much she had to be thankful for; but there was a lack in her life. There was something wanting which could never be hers now. Fame she had—money sufficient; but the love which had come to her had passed quickly. She could never love again as she had done that once. The memory of it was a dear possession—a sacred treasure—locked in safe keeping. Into that inmost recess of her treasure house nothing else could ever enter.

She was there alone with the children one afternoon. Mrs. Tennant was tired and had stayed indoors. The children were busy among the pools, and Olive had closed her book, and with her hat off, and her hands clasped behind her head, sat looking seaward dreaming. The glow of health was in her cheeks. Never perhaps had she been more beautiful than now. The breeze stirred in her dull golden hair, and blew a rebellious curl of it across her forehead.

The man coming slowly over the rocks paused to look at the graceful figure. He hoped she would turn toward him. He glanced to where the children were playing, and looked back along the way he had come. He deliberated whether he should go on or turn back. Then he went on slowly. He was within a few yards of her when she heard his step, and seeing him, started up, her hat in her hand.

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"Mr. Densham!"

He took off his hat and came to her side.

"I might pretend that this was a chance meeting, Miss Vaughan, but it is not. Zett told me where you were."

"I did not expect you to follow me," she said.

"A few weeks ago I had no thought of doing so," Densham answered. "I think I should have turned back when I saw you just now, but I have a message for you. You do not see the English newspapers here, I suppose?"

"No."

Densham told her shortly what had happened. She listened to his recital eagerly, with her lips parted.

"And Zett is in prison?"

"For three years, Miss Vaughan. He told me to tell you not to worry about him, that he would be all right and happy; and he sent a message to the little girl yonder, if she is Mavis, that he hoped she'd not forget him."

"Why did he do it? Oh, why was he so foolish as to do it?" Olive exclaimed.

"He did it for your sake. Rightly or wrongly, he believed that you would never be safe from slander while Overton lived. He meant to stop his lies, and there is no doubt he would have killed him had he not been prevented in time. Zett expressed no regret for what he had done, and went to his punishment gladly."

"And Mr. Overton?"

"He is likely to be crippled for life. His spine is injured."

"I wish I had not left London. Zett would not have done it had I not been away."

"Sooner or later he would have done it, I think, but he was glad you were away. He did not want you to know anything about it until it was all over, and his one thought was to keep your name from being mentioned. In this he succeeded."

"How did you hear of it, Mr. Densham?"

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"Zett got somebody in Holloway to write to me, and remind me of a promise I once made to help him if he were in trouble. I did my best to redeem the promise. He had the best counsel I could get, and I do not think I could possibly have done any more for him than I have done. I think my being in court helped him a little, poor fellow; and if it is any comfort to you to know it, I have promised that when he comes out I will take care of him."

"That is very kind of you. Indeed, Mr. Densham, it is very good of you to come all this way to give me Zett's message. I am afraid my thanks sound very cold, but——"

"I understand, Miss Vaughan."

"You are going back to England again?" she asked, after a pause.

"To-morrow, perhaps. I am staying in St. Maux at the hotel. I came yesterday."

She put on her hat.

"I must be going home," she said. "The children have tea early. Indeed everything is early in St. Maux—getting up, meals, and going to bed."

"That is why every one looks so well and—and healthy." He looked at her as he said it. "May I see you before I go to-morrow?"

"I am afraid——"

"Please. There was another message Zett sent to you, but I cannot tell you it now."

"Why not?"

"You are going home to tea."

She looked out seaward. A white sail far away caught the sunlight under the rocks—here they were in shadow.

"I shall be here to-morrow," she said.

"Thank you."

She went quickly toward the pool where the children were playing, leaving Densham standing there. He watched her as she went along the shore, the boy and girl bounding along beside her.

"They have filled her life," he said to himself. "I

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have come on a fool's errand. She would have turned from me had I not had Zett's message as a reason for my coming."

He waited until she was out of sight, and then went slowly back to the hotel.

He lingered a long time over his dinner, thinking of to-morrow. He should see her—speak to her at least once more. If only something would happen, now, to-night—something that would place her in peril, and that he could be at hand to save her.

The moon was over the sea, and a path of silver light stretched like a spirit's highway toward the unknown—the shadowy horizon. Since the afternoon a breeze had sprung up, and the waves were breaking on the beach, and showed white crests seaward where the moonlight caught them. Densham lit a cigar and went down to the water's edge. It was a perfect night, and he walked slowly along, listening to the wash of the water. There was sadness in the sound. It fitted his mood well.

The lights of the hotel were far behind now; but still he went on, thinking—thinking of Olive, and of to-morrow. Had the night an inspiration for him, to tell him what words to use to-morrow? Could he say anything to make her forget—to make her pity him?

He stopped suddenly. Coming toward him was a figure he knew only too well. Her hand was holding her hat on, and the breeze fluttered her loose skirts. She did not see him until she was close to him.

"It was hot in the hotel," he said, as though in apology for being there, "and the night is perfect. You are thinly clad, Miss Vaughan, and the air has a touch of cold in it."

"It will not hurt me. I sometimes come for a lonely walk when the children have gone to bed."

"The children are evidently a great deal to you."

"Yes; I love them."

They were standing side by side, and the silver pathway stretched to their feet.

"I have grown more honest than I used to be, Miss

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Vaughan," Densham said, after a few moments' silence. "I am afraid I let you think this afternoon that it was Zett's message which brought me to St. Maux. I was glad to have it as an excuse for coming; but I had made up my mind to try and find you even before I received his letter. Zett's business delayed me."

"Why should you want to find me?"

"Miss Vaughan, I—I have thought lately that some who had been just to me were becoming merciful. Robin Mackenzie came out of his way to shake hands with me when I returned to Felstead a little while ago."

Olive's eyes traveled slowly up the silver pathway.

"He told me that you had had my letter. It could tell you nothing but what you knew; yet my pen may have spoken more convincingly than my tongue."

"It told me only what I knew," Olive said quietly.

"Only what you knew," repeated Densham. "All my sin and my bitter repentance, and my love. It told you of my love too."

She did not answer.

"I did you a great wrong. If there were the faintest shadow of an excuse for me, I will not urge it in my own defense. Every word in that letter, every word I spoke to you afterwards, was true. I loved you purely, as a man may love a woman. That I told you so when I had no right to speak was my crime. But believe me, everything I said was true. I loved you then—now I almost worship you. Olive, Olive, is it too late? Others have been merciful to me—you will you be less generous?"

"I have pitied you."

"I ask little more," Densham said. He stood before her, his hat in his hand. "The world is still young for both of us. I want to do some good in my life—won't you help me? Much in me is unworthy, but I have the yearning after better things. You have not found happiness in the love of a good man—perhaps because you cannot forget, quite forget, that night at

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Felstead. Won't you pity a man who, although he is of little worth, can at least shield you from life's rough weather? I will not say how I love you. You told me such love as mine was worthless, and I have done nothing yet to prove the contrary to you. I only ask pity and your presence near me." Olive, my dear, don't send me away."

Suddenly she burst into tears.

"I am a weak fool to cry, Victor, but I am so happy."

"Olive!"

He took her in his arms and looked into her eyes. Tears were there, glistening in the moonlight, smiles behind them.

"I dedicate my life to your happiness, darling; do with me what you will."

"Stay with me, Victor. Love me," she whispered.

He kissed her lips.

"What was Zett's other message?" she said.

"Tell her that when I come out, I hope to see her very friendly with Mr. Densham, because she's my pal like he is—the only two in the world who were ever good to me or cared a straw about me."

"Poor Zett!"

"We will do all in our power, dearest, to make his life happy," said Densham. "It was for your sake he did it—for my wife's sake."

"You must let me go now, Victor."

"For a little while. Olive, when will you come home to me?"

She nestled a little closer in his arms.

"When you like, Victor."

"Mine!" he said. "Mine at last!"

"And forever," came the whispered answer.

CHAPTER XXXI

BROKEN ENDS AND FRAVED EDGES

So this history ends, as every history must end— incomplete. To every life story there is a sequel, but it is seldom written. Marriage bells ring in the mid-time of our life, not at the end of it; yet how often they figure as the happy ending, even as here. After all, what we call an ending is only a point attained, a pause—Death itself being no true ending. Herein is the promise of the eternal nature of all things.

This, then, is our pause. The machinery of this little world of our imagining must stop for a moment while we gather up the broken ends and the frayed edges of the work. Then the wheels will revolve again. How will they turn for those we have lived with for a little while?

Any one who cares to turn down the side street from the Waterloo Road may see the wax modeler's shop. It still bears the legend, "Gibson, Modeler in Wax, 1820"; but as with Gibson, so with Jacob Farrow. He has been gathered to his fathers, unrespected and unmourned. A little store of gold was found in the back parlor, and a few miserable little debtors found relief in the old man's death. There is another proprietor behind the counter now, and he is clean. Well-cared-for children run in and out of the shop on fine days, but how they manage to live is as much a mystery as ever.

Mrs. Tennant lives and is prosperous, her children fast growing into man and woman. We heard that Mavis was already engaged, but cannot vouch for the truth of the statement. One thing concerning the Tennants is known to us. A portion of their income

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is derived from certain securities transferred into Mrs. Tennant's name by Olive Vaughan. The three or four hundred a year which had relieved her mind so much was of little moment to Olive after that night at St. Maux.

The wheels turn heavily for one man. He wanders from health resort to health resort, and has become a familiar figure drawn slowly along in his bath-chair. He is full of whims and crotchets, and irritable to all he comes in contact with. Those who do not know him pity him; their own rude health makes them compassionate. Those who know him shrug their shoulders, and remember what he was. It was the Honorable Somebody who told a bosom friend of his that he didn't set up for a saint himself, but he had no desire to renew his acquaintance with Edward Overton.

At Felstead the trees have been cut back a little from the Hall windows. More air and sunlight enter the house. The gardens in their seasons are gay with flowers, and a new conservatory has been built, opening out of the most delicious room imaginable. It is Lady Bountiful's sanctum. Lord and Lady Bountiful have the Denshams become in Felstead. In these days one hears nothing of a bad landlord at the Hall. It would be as much as your life was worth to suggest such a thing to Robin Mackenzie. Now, if he wishes to point a moral and adorn a tale, he holds up Lord and Lady Bountiful as examples. Every man, woman, and child in the village worships her, yet one beside her worships her most of all. "What I am my wife has made me," he says and believes; and with a snatch of song upon her lips his wife contradicts him. Beautiful she is in body and soul, and as happy as the day is long. She loves Felstead and all around it. It is seldom she cares to go to London, and does not care for the theater. Olive Vaughan the actress is no more; but Olive Densham, wife and mother, lives and fills a large space in the lives of many.

"Mother!" So Victor had whispered that early

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morning when he kissed her and her baby, destined to be a second Victor. No other name should be his, Olive declared, and her word was law. And little Victor is old enough now to be a tyrant. He labors under the impression that the whole world of Felstead is rejoiced at his existence, and has been known to insist on Parker's attention even when that staid worthy is engaged with his master.

He has one very willing slave, a cripple, whose existence at Felstead the village is forgetting to wonder at. He came one evening with Mr. Densham from town, and has rooms with the lodgekeeper. They say he is very useful about the Hall, but in what particular way nobody seems able to define. It is certain, however, that when he entered the Hall with her husband, Mrs. Densham took both his hands and shed tears over him; so it is no wonder that the people in the village respect him.

"You are quite happy, Zett?" Olive asked him once. He looked at her and then at Victor.

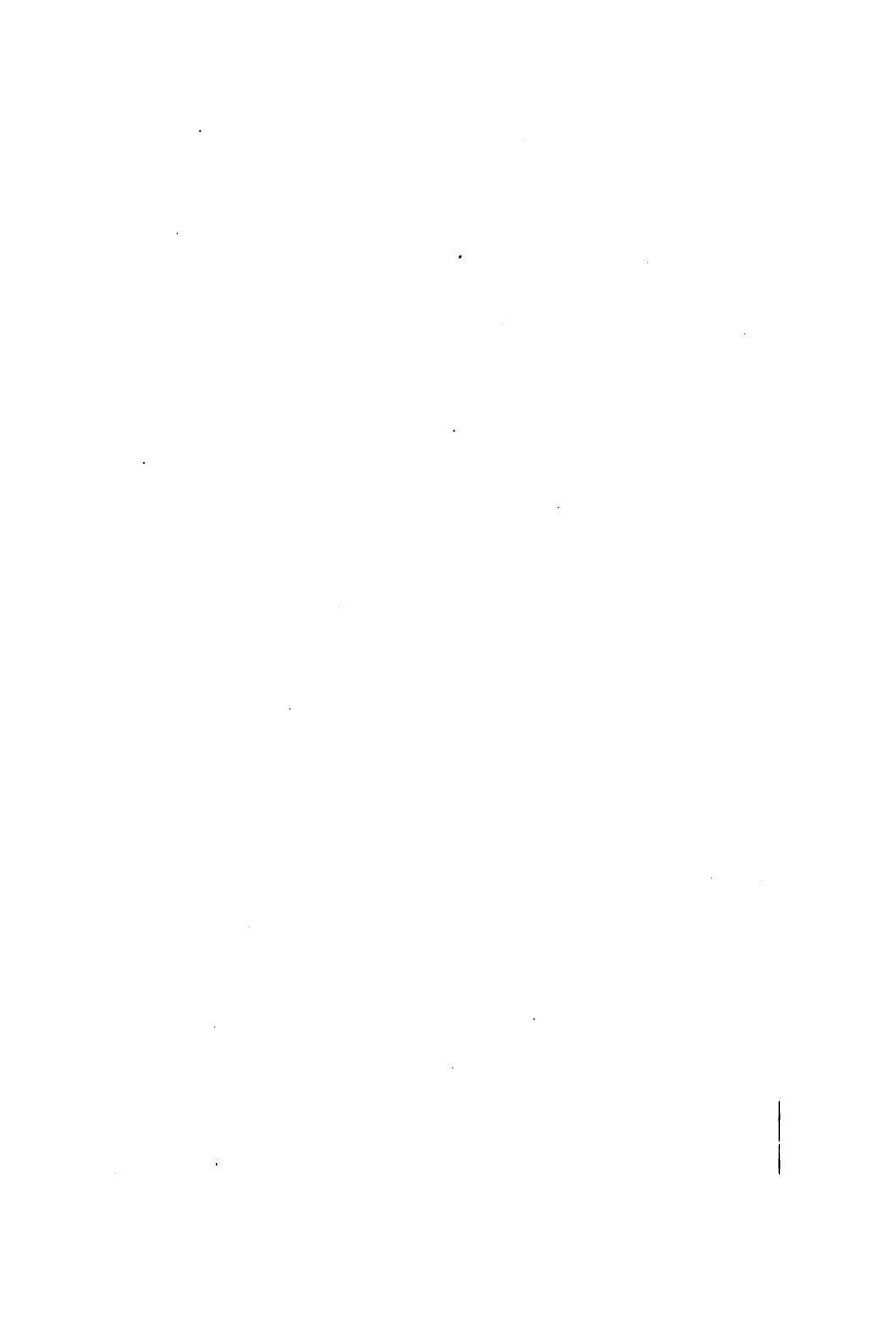
"It was my great wish to find you friendly, and I have. My two best friends."

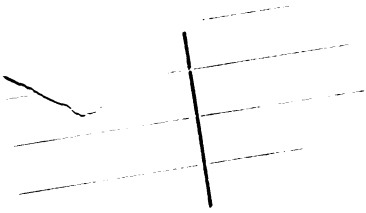
So the wheels turn on.

THE END



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